

The Varangian Guard 988–1453



Raffaele D'Amato • Illustrated by Giuseppe Rava

DR RAFFAELE D'AMATO is an experienced Turin-based researcher of the ancient world. He is an external professor to the Athens University School of Philosophy and Material Culture. He has previously written *Men-at-Arms 425: Roman Military Clothing (3)* and *Men-at-Arms 451: Imperial Roman Naval Forces 31 BC–AD 500*.

GIUSEPPE RAVA was born in Faenza in 1963, and took an interest in all things military from an early age. Entirely self-taught, Giuseppe has established himself as a leading military history artist, and is inspired by the works of the great military painters, such as Detaille, Meissonier, Rochling, Lady Butler, Ottenfeld and Angus McBride. He lives and works in Italy.

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TITLE PAGE **Detail from fresco of c.1212, showing soldiers of the Nicæan Empire which survived the fall of Constantinople to the Fourth Crusade. The red hair and beards and long-hafted axes almost certainly identify these figures as Varangians. (in situ, Church of St John at Arabissos – today Karsi Kilise, Turkey; author's photo)**

Dedication

To my beloved Constantinople

Acknowledgements

The photos in this book are due to the great courtesy of my Bulgarian colleagues and friends, primarily Dr Vladimir Lomakin, Prof Boyan Totev and Prof Valeri Yotov of the University of Varna. Without their assistance, I would not have been able to provide the previously unseen images of original Varangian weaponry that appear in these pages.

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Finally, a special acknowledgement must be given to my dear friend and illustrator Giuseppe Rava, who has so painstakingly brought to life the Varangians of Byzantium in their magnificent equipment.

Editor's note

While the people of the Eastern Roman Empire always referred to themselves as 'Romans', to avoid confusion we have used here the usual British term 'Byzantine'.

Artist's note

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Giuseppe Rava
via Borgotto 17
48018 Faenza (RA)
Italy

www.g-rava.it
info@g-rava.it

The Publishers regret that they can enter into no correspondence upon this matter.

THE VARANGIAN GUARD

988–1453



Rus appliqué ornament in shape of an eagle or raven, 10–11th centuries AD, from southern Bulgaria. This is no doubt a relic of Basil II's campaigns, in which the Rus contingent sent by Grand Prince Vladimir of Kiev played an important part. Personal tastes naturally influenced the garb of many Varangians, which featured traditional Norse adornments such as 'Thor's hammer' amulets, brooches and drinking-horns. Bracelets were often worn, including some of twisted wires decorated with animal-head motives, in a combination of silver with bronze or gold. (Photo courtesy Professors Valeri Yotov and Boyan Totev)

INTRODUCTION

By the end of the 9th century AD, Scandinavians attracted to Russia in search of furs and slaves had built their own state amongst the Slavs. A considerable part of what is now western Russia became a Swedish colony, with a major northern centre at Novgorod and a second further south on the middle Dniepr at Kiev. At the end of the century Oleg, the leader of Novgorod, united north and south by his capture of the latter city.

At that date the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire was still the richest and best-organized state in Europe, and Constantinople was the continent's greatest city. Its unique position on the Bosphorus, where many trade routes ended or crossed, also brought to the city adventurers from Scandinavia and Russia, who followed the 'road of the Varangians to the Greeks', mentioned in the Russian Primary Chronicle and described by the Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (AD 913–959) in his *De Administrando Imperio*. These Vikings sailed from Novgorod via the Duna, the Neva, Lake Ladoga, the Volkov and Lake Ilmen, and dragged or rolled their ships over logs to relaunch them on the Lovat; they followed the Volga to Kiev and the Dniepr, and from there negotiated the Seven Cataracts. Risking ambushes by the Pechenegs, they reached Berezany and the Black Sea, or the River Ditzina and the district of Mesembria, from which they finally arrived at Miklagard (the 'City of Michael' – Constantinople), whose splendours they recorded in their sagas from the beginning of the 10th century.

From the name of their state, the Scandinavian incomers were called in the sources *Rus* or *Rhos*, a term whose origin is still debated, but Eastern Slavonic and Byzantine sources called these adventurers Varangians (*Varjag*, *Varegu*, *Væringjar*). Again, the etymology is debatable, but a widely accepted theory is that the word comes from *vår* (pl. *vårar*), which means 'confidence' or 'vow of fidelity' (in Proto-Norse *vāringr*, thus *Væringr*), i.e. a group of men who had sworn oaths of allegiance and fellowship. (The Germanic prototype is *Wāreganga*, a foreigner who has taken service with a new lord by a contract of fealty.) At first the Scandinavians' relations with the New Rome were characterized by both trading and war, and several unsuccessful attacks were launched by the Rus between AD 860 and 1043; during this period the Vikings mixed with the local Slav population and their cultures became assimilated. But the Vikings fought not only as freelance plunderers but also as paid mercenaries, and in Byzantium they were destined to be remembered as members of one of the most famous corps of mercenaries in history: the Varangian Guard, which protected the holy Emperors of Constantinople, and gained an elite reputation in Europe and the Near East.

CHRONOLOGY

860 First Russian attack on Constantinople

874 Treaty concluded between the Empire and the Rus, who undertake to provide men for Byzantine service

902 700 Rus take part in Byzantine naval operation against Muslims of Crete

907 Second Russian attack on Constantinople, followed by treaty, including provision of Viking mercenaries for Byzantine army

910 or 911 700 Rus are listed under command of Imérios in expedition against Crete, Cyprus and coasts of Syria

911, 2 September Treaty between Byzantium and the Rus recognizes latter's right to be enlisted for service in the imperial army 'at whatsoever time they might come, and whatsoever their number'

935 Seven Rus ships and 415 men take part in Byzantine expedition to Italy

941 Third Russian attack on Constantinople; Russian fleet destroyed by Greek Fire

949 Russian *ousiai* used as coastguard ships at Dyrrachium and along Dalmatian coast; c.630 men sail with expedition against Muslim Cretans

954–5 Rus serve in Syrian campaign under general Várdhas Phokás against the Arabs; Syrian poet Mutanabbi records presence of Russians amongst Byzantine troops at battle of Hadath, 12 November 955

964–5 Rus among forces sent to Sicily under command of Manuel and Nikêtas Phokás, which are defeated by Arabs at Rametta; others take part in expedition to Crete

967–8 Two Russian and two 'Frankish' (Norman) ships serve in Byzantine fleet assisting provincial governor in Italy

988 Presumptive date of institution of permanent body of Rus/Varangians as elite mercenary guardsmen attached to the person of Emperor Basil II

988–9 Campaigns of Basil II against rebellion of Várdhas Phokás; Grand Prince Vladimir of Kiev sends 6,000 men to aid Basil

994 & 999 Rus take part in Basil's campaigns against Syria

1000–01 Rus take part in Basil's campaigns in Georgia and Armenia

Highly decorated late 10th–early 11th century axe blade, from Stana, Novi Pazar region, Bulgaria. This magnificent specimen of the Varangians' characteristic 'single-edged' battleaxe is richly ornamented with silvering and black niello. (Shoumen Museum of History; photo courtesy Prof Valeri Yotov)



1001–18 Rus form core of Basil's armies in campaigns against Bulgarians

1009–11 Rus sent against rebel Melos of Bari in southern Italy; take part in recapture of city in June 1011

1016, January Combined naval forces of the Empire and the Rus of Kiev, under Sfengos (Sveinki), brother of Grand Prince Vladimir, sent against the Khazars of the Black Sea; successful annexation of territories of Georgios Toulos to the Empire

1018 Second campaign against Melos of Bari; Rus prominent in victory at Cannae

1021 Basil's second Georgian campaign

1025 Rus, Vandals, Turks, Bulgars, Vlachs and Macedonians serve in Sicily, under command of the *Prōtospatharios* Orestes

1033 Rus/Varangians take part in expedition of the *Prōtospatharios* Theóktistos to Egypt

1034–43 Service of Harald Sigurdson (Hardrada) as Varangian in Constantinople

1041 Varangians among troops of the *Katepáno* Dokeanos fighting against Normans at Monte Maggiore

1043 Attack on Constantinople by Russians under Vladimir, son of Jaroslav the Wise; their fleet is entirely destroyed by Greek Fire

1045 Emperor sends 3,000 Varangians to assist in operations in Armenia

1054 Campaign against Seljuk Turks in Armenia

1070–80 Strong contingents of English and Danes recruited into Varangian Guard

1071, 19 August Battle of Manzikert: disastrous defeat of Emperor Rhomanós IV Diogénés, captured by the Seljuks while fighting amongst his Varangian guardsmen

1077 Varangians serve in armies of both Bryennios and Komnênós at battle of Kalouryta

1078 Varangians serve in army of usurper Vasiliakes

1081, March Varangians and *Athanatoi* hold walls of Constantinople against advance of Aléxios Komnênós. **October**, Varangians suffer heavy loss at battle of Dyrrachium, fighting for Aléxios against Robert Guiscard's Normans

1087–91 Varangian units serve in army of Aléxios I Komnênós at battles of Drastar (Drista) and Levunium in campaign against the Pechenegs

1122 English Varangians make decisive attack on Pechenegs in victory of Eski Zagra (Beroe)

1149 Varangian contingents defend Thebes, Greece, against Normans

1154 300 Varangians instrumental in foiling attempt to assassinate Emperor Manuel I Komnênós

1155–56 Varangians defeat Normans under Renault of Chatillon in Cyprus

1176, 11 September Most of Manuel's Varangians wiped out by a Turkish army in disastrous defeat at Myriokephalon

1179 Varangians present at victorious battle of Claudiopolis

1200 During usurpation of Aléxios III Angelos Komnênós, Varangians put down two attempts to topple him from the throne

1203–04 Fourth Crusade: Varangians attempt to defend Constantinople during attacks by Franks and Venetians

1205–61 Regiment of Varangians serving in the exile Nicaean Empire and the Despotate of Epirus

1261 Restoration of legitimate imperial authority in Constantinople under the Palaiologos



Spearhead, of Type M according to Petersen's classifications, with silvering and niello still visible on the socket. This undocumented find is from north-eastern Bulgaria, like many of the precious artefacts of Scandinavian styles that confirm the presence of the Varangians in these campaigns. (Photo courtesy Prof Valeri Yotov)

1265 Varangian garrison defends Ainos against the Bulgarians

1341 Kantakouzenos selects 500 men as bodyguards for Emperor John V, adding to them 'axe-bearing Varangians, as many as there were in service'

1351 Varangian Guard mentioned by Pseudo-Kodinos as participating in imperial ceremonies in Byzantium

HISTORY OF THE GUARD

10th century

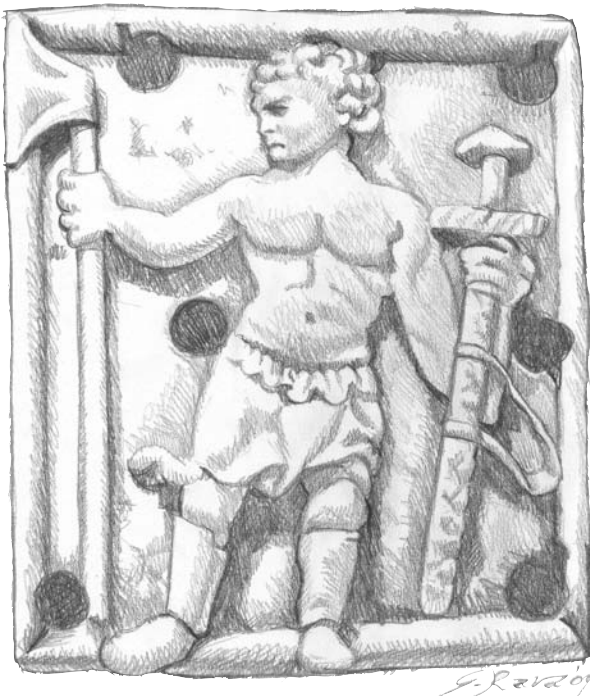
The peace established between Constantinople and Kiev in 874, which lasted until Oleg's renewed attacks in around 907–911, opened the era of Rus military assistance to Byzantium. A body of Russians and Norsemen appeared in the imperial entourage from the time of Emperor Michael III, and numbers also served from the beginning of the 10th century as levied troops (*stratiotes*) and mercenaries in the Byzantine army; hiring them was a convenient way of guarding the north-western frontiers against nomad raiders. From the 960s onwards the Empire's armies contained many Norse and Rus mercenaries. Constantine Porphyrogenitus mentions (*De Cer.*, II, 579) 'baptized Russians' at court during the reception of an Arab ambassador, referring to them as a separate company alongside Dalmatians and naval guards.

A decisive change occurred in 988. In the summer of 987 the rebel Várdhas Phokás had marched on Constantinople, and, according to Byzantine sources and the Russian Primary Chronicle, the Russian Grand Prince (*stolny Knyaz*) of Kiev, Vladimir the Great (980–1015), received a request for help from the Emperor Basil II Porphyrogenitus (976–1025). Vladimir's 6,000 men arrived in Byzantine territory

in winter 987/988 (Kedhrênós, II, 444; Psellos, I, 9; Zonarás, III, 553; Asochik, II, 164–165; Elmacen, 313; Yahya Ibn Said, II, 425–426). This was an opportunity for Vladimir to free himself of unruly warriors who, since 980, 'furious at the Prince's unwillingness or incapacity to pay them their wages ... demanded that he show them the way to the Greeks'. At Chrysopolis the Varangians surprised a rebel force while they were feasting, killing many and putting the rest to flight. In April 989 the Varangians aided Basil II in his victory over Delphinas, a lieutenant of Várdhas Phokás, at Scutari, and at the battle of Abydos in which Phokás was finally defeated and died.

Grand Prince Vladimir converted to Orthodox Christianity and married Princess Anna of Byzantium, thus changing forever the destiny of Russia. During Basil's campaign of 994 against Syria, Russians took part in the decisive victory at Antioch and pillaged as far as Tripoli. In his decisive expedition of 999 Basil besieged and captured Emesa; Yahya Ibn Said

Carving from a 10–11th century ivory casket, representing a Varangian guardsman. This is an important source for the length of the axe, which is shown as identical to the height of the warrior. Considering the legendary tallness of the Norsemen, this would imply a shaft all of 6ft (1.8m) long. (Schnütgen Museum, Cologne; drawing by Giuseppe Rava, and see Plate C2)



(II, 458) relates that the inhabitants fled into the fortified monastery of St Constantine, but the Rus set fire to it and compelled the defenders to surrender.

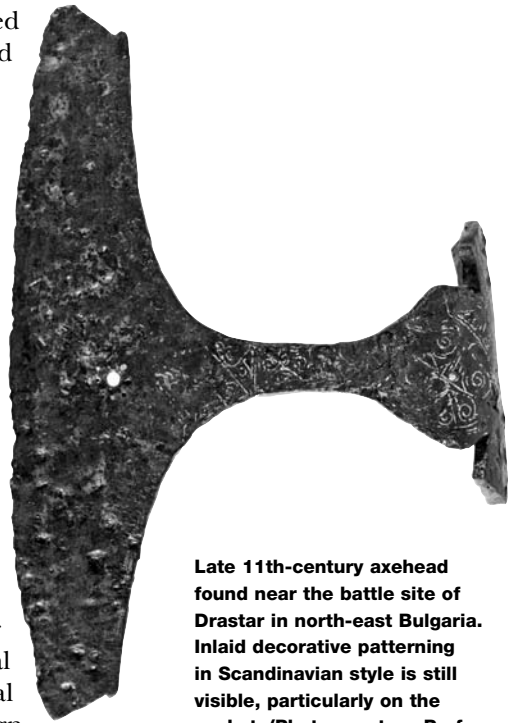
11th century

At the turn of the century some 6,000 Rus accompanied Basil on campaign in Georgia and Armenia. A quarrel between a Rus and a Georgian during a parley at Havcic led to general fighting in which the Armenian Grand Prince Patriarchos and many others were killed (Asochik, II, 165; Aristakès de Lastivert).

Vladimir's contributions to the victories of Basil II led to a significant change in the imperial guard. The surviving Rus formed the nucleus of the imperial bodyguard which became known as the Varangian Guard, and the sight of these axemen became a sign of the emperor's presence on the battlefield. There was a trend towards increased recruitment of mercenaries, but Basil's recruitment of the Varangians was qualitatively and contextually of a different order. The incumbent ruler needed a guard who would be uncompromisingly loyal to their paymaster; he needed a regiment of exceptional fighters, well disciplined and trained, whose foreign mercenary status insulated them from the regional and court intrigues and political and religious factionalism of the Byzantine aristocracy and population. The Rus/Varangian regiment was involved in all the campaigns of Basil II, notably forming the hard core of the field armies employed in Bulgaria and Anatolia.

Between 1001 and 1018, Basil II progressively captured the territories of the Bulgarian Tsar Samuel in Greece and Macedonia. The presence of the Guard in these campaigns is attested by written sources, and also by the quantities of Norse equipment of 10–11th century date found on sites in Bulgaria that were taken by the Byzantines. In 1014 the campaign culminated in the battle of Kleidon Pass (Balathista), where the Bulgarian army was crushed, and Basil blinded nine out of every ten of some 15,000 Bulgar prisoners before sending them back to Samuel. When he captured Samuel's capital of Achrida (Ohrid) in 1018, he divided the prisoners into three groups: one-third for himself, one-third for the Byzantine soldiers, and one-third for the Varangians – a clear sign of the latter's importance.

Also in 1018, the rebel nobleman Melos of Bari, opposing Byzantine domination of southern Italy, confronted the imperial army in several pitched battles. That of Cannae – fought on the same field where Hannibal of Carthage had destroyed the Roman army in 216 BC – was between the army of the *Katepano* of Italy, Vasil Voioannes, including contingents of Russians, and the Lombards under Melos, with Norman mercenaries led by Gilbert Buatère. When the Lombards marched against the Rus they were routed, and Gilbert and many of his Normans were killed. In 1021 Basil led a second expedition into Georgia, where the Rus were mentioned for their pitiless ferocity when ordered to lay waste to the countryside, and they took part in the final decisive victory over the Georgians and Abasgians.



Late 11th-century axehead found near the battle site of Drastar in north-east Bulgaria. Inlaid decorative patterning in Scandinavian style is still visible, particularly on the socket. (Photo courtesy Profs Valeri Yotov and Boyan Totev)



Figures believed to represent Varangians are found in several depictions of Christ's Betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane. This soldier from the Nea Moni mosaic, c.1043, has blond hair, and carries a long-shafted axe apparently with a double blade. His tunic is dark blue-grey, with a dark blue yoke decorated with a diamond and arrowhead shapes in gold. His shield pattern is of concentric bands: from the outside inwards – red and blue lines on gold; dark blue spots, then alternating red and blue spots, on blue-grey; white dots; and a dark green centre with an unclear grey and red blazon. (Author's collection)

After Basil's death emperors continued to employ the Varangians as their principal bodyguard unit, and in 1032 an interesting episode confirms that some were engaged in the East in the victorious campaign of the general Georgios Maniakes against Edessa. Matthew of Edessa (*Chronique*, 49) tell us that a warrior serving under Maniakes was sent as an envoy to the Emir of Harran, but that the man lost his temper and struck the emir with an axe; the Jerusalem manuscript of the chronicle states that this man was a Russian (*ouroz armen*). In 1040 a detachment of the Varangian Guard composed of Rus and Scandinavians led by the legendary Harald Sigurdson – 'Hardrada' – fought under the flag of Maniakes in Sicily, achieving great results on the battlefield of Troina (*Annales Barenenses*, 54; *Cecaumeni Strategikon*, 97; *Harald's Saga*, in *Heimskringla* III ff). Harald was then employed by the Emperor Michael the Paflagonian against the rebel Delianos in Bulgaria in 1041, and for his deeds received at Mosynupolis the rank of *Spatharokandidatos*. According to the sagas he took the main role in the campaign, earning the title of '*Bolgara Brennir*', 'Devastator of the Bulgarians'.

In 1054, in one of the first invasions of Byzantine Armenia by the Seljuk Turks of the Sultan Toghrul-bek during the reign of the Emperor Constantine IX Monomákhos, the successful Turks arrived before the fortress of Baberd (modern Baiburt). The Armenian historian Aristakès de Lastivert mentions a surprise encounter between the Turks and a detachment of the Russo-Varangian *druzhdina* ('*Vrhangs-Vrangki*') and 'Franks' under command of the *Akolouthos* Mikhail. The Varangians won a great victory, killing the Turkish commander and freeing the prisoners the Seljuks had with them, but did not risk pursuing the retreating Turks in case they fell back on a superior force.

The Varangians are mentioned together with the *Vardariotai* as functional Guard regiments from 1068, and participated in the campaigns of Isaac Komnênós and Rhomanós IV Diogénés. They were involved in the disaster of Manzikert in 1071, where Rhomanós was betrayed by conspirators and defeated by Alp Arslan's Seljuk Turks, who then overran Anatolia. During the subsequent civil war many disaffected Varangians served in the army of John and Nikêphóros Bryennios, later defeated by Aléxios Komnênós at Kalouryta. John was pardoned and accepted back into the imperial service, but was recognized and killed with an axe by a Varangian whose nose he had ordered cut off.

The Varangians were the elite unit of foreign mercenaries in the small but effective central army raised during the reigns of Michael VII (1071–8) and Nikêphóros III Bothoniates (1078–81). After Michael was overthrown by Nikêphóros, Vasiliakes, the former governor of Dyrrachium, declared himself emperor, and Varangians were among

the army he led on Constantinople. Defeated at the River Vardar, he retreated to Thessalonika, but was handed over to the imperial forces by his own men. Under the new Emperor Aléxios I Komnênós (1081–1118) the Varangians were part of the nucleus of the army restored after Manzikert, and their activity during the imperium of the Komnênós is fully attested by the sources.

Fifteen years after the battle of Hastings, a body of Anglo-Saxon axemen – some of whom may even have been veterans of Harold Godwinson's army – fought against Normans once again, this time while serving in Aléxios I's Varangian Guard. At Dyrrachium (Durazzo, Durrës, on the Adriatic coast of Albania), Aléxios was fighting to repel an invasion of the Empire by southern Italian Normans under the formidable Robert Guiscard. When Aléxios led 50,000 men to raise the siege of the city by Robert's 20,000 troops, he divided his army widely for a pincer attack around an inlet of the sea. The Varangians formed the centre of the vanguard in the Byzantine force that made the most direct approach, and arrived on the field to find the Normans already advanced and drawn up in battle array. For the battle of 18 October 1081 the Varangians were provided with horses in order to get to the field quickly and execute a turning movement, with units of *Vardariotai* horse-archers arrayed behind them. The guardsmen accomplished this, but when they saw the enemy they were overcome by eagerness to get into the fray. They sent their horses to the rear, and advanced on foot in a solid column against the attacking Norman wing, without waiting for the support of the rest of the army. With their supporting archers deterring Norman cavalry attacks, the axemen were at first victorious; they defeated the infantry opposing them and drove the division commanded by Count Amaury of Bari back to the seashore. However, the Varangians then advanced too far, and were surprised by an infantry flank attack. In disordered ranks, isolated from the main army and weakened by 'the weight of their armour', they were then cut to pieces by a vigorous Norman charge. Some of the guardsmen fled to a nearby church upon a hillock on the seashore; surrounded by Normans, they defended the church, and some clambered onto the roof. The Varangians resisted obstinately, but the Normans heaped up wood and set fire to the church; the roof collapsed, hurling those on it down on top of those below in a suffocating crush. Some of the Anglo-Saxons sallied out to fight and die one by one, while others perished in the flames.

The main body of the regiment fought in Aléxios' campaign against the Pechenegs in 1087, under the command of their *Akolouthos* Na[m] bites, as confirmed by documentary sources and by recent Bulgarian archaeological excavations on the battlefield of Drastar (Dristra). After the defeat at Drastar the term 'Varangian' is not mentioned again in Anna Komnêna's *Alexiad*; it is possible that the regiment was so decimated in this disaster that it needed to be reconstituted completely over the years that followed. However, the regiment took part in the wars



Richly inlaid late 11th-century Norse axehead of 'bearded' or *skeggox* type, found near Drastar, Bulgaria. (Photo courtesy Profs Valeri Yotov and Boyan Totev)

Detail from miniatures in the Scylitzès MS, folio 26v A, dating from the end of the 12th century. Most scholars have identified the subject as guardsmen at the assassination of Emperor Leo V in AD 820, but depicted as soldiers of the artist's own day. They are shown for the most part in Byzantine equipment, but the long axes – of which 18 can be counted in the full folio – are believed to identify them as Varangians. (Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid; ex-Kolias)





This detail from the Scylitzès MS includes both a round and a kite-shaped shield; for a reconstruction of the blazon on the latter, see Plate F5. (Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid; ex-Kolias)

against the Serbs and the Turks. In 1097, Aléxios and his guard were present at the recapture of Nicaea by the combined forces of the Empire and the 'Franks' of the First Crusade. The following year the emperor, accompanied by his Varangians, campaigned to recapture territory in Anatolia.

12th century

Between 1118 and 1122 English axe-bearers accompanied John II Komnênós on his campaigns against the Turks and the Pechenegs. In 1122 John defeated a Pecheneg invasion of imperial territory in the Balkans at the battle of Eski Zagra (Beroe), where, after his Frankish, Flemish and Byzantine units fail to break the defensive circle of Pecheneg wagons, the emperor overcame his reluctance to risk committing his prized 'wineskins' – his English Varangians – and sent them into battle. Although allegedly facing odds of up to 60 to one, the Englishmen nevertheless broke into the wagon-laager; the Pechenegs were overwhelmingly defeated, and slaughtered in great numbers. Varangians were probably also with John at the siege of Antioch in 1137.

During the reign of Manuel I Komnênós, in 1149 Varangian reinforcements were sent to Greece to help in the unsuccessful defence of Thebes against the Normans led by Roger II of Sicily, and probably accompanied the emperor in its subsequent recapture. In 1155–56 Renault de Chatillon, Crusader prince of Antioch, attacked Cyprus, which numbered Varangians among its garrison; after an initial success Renault was defeated and brought by the Varangians to grovel at the emperor's feet. A little later Varangians were much in evidence when Manuel I made his triumphal entry into Antioch, keeping an eye on the disarmed Latin nobles participating in the triumphal procession (Kinnamos, II,188,3). Twenty years later Manuel took Varangians with him on an expedition against the Turks in Anatolia; when his army was taken by surprise and shattered at Myriokephalon on 11 September 1176 Manuel barely escaped with his life, and most of his Varangians were killed. Some of those who escaped were Englishmen, and were sent home bearing a letter from Manuel to King Henry II: 'We have also felt it a pleasure that it so happened that some of the chief men of your nobility were with us, who will, at your desire, inform you on all the circumstances'. The Guard is again mentioned with the Emperor Manuel at the victory of Claudiopolis in 1179.

13th century

The inglorious Fourth Crusade of 1203–4 saw the capture of Constantinople by the Western crusaders and Venetians and the destruction of the Byzantine imperium. When the Crusaders first appeared in front of Constantinople on 24 June 1203 some 6,000 Varangians manned the walls. Soon afterwards they achieved several Byzantine successes during the siege: Villardouin mentions that they captured two or four knights and brought them in front of Emperor Aléxios III Angelos Komnênós. Varangian guardsmen defended a barbican at the landward corner of the walls. On 17 July, when the Crusaders managed to destroy with a battering ram the seawall in the position known as the Apobathra Basileios, they were repulsed by Pisans and by Varangians who did great execution with their axes. However,



the Venetians scaled the harbour walls and captured 25 towers within an hour; that night the emperor fled the city, and on 18 July the Eunuch in charge of the treasury, Constantine Philoxenites, backed by some Varangian guardsmen, reinstalled in power the dethroned and blinded Isaac II Angelos along with his son Aléxios IV, who negotiated with the Crusaders and Venetians.

In January 1204 Byzantine nobles dethroned the puppet emperor and the Varangians transferred their allegiance to the usurper Aléxios Doukas Mourtzouphlos, whom they installed on the throne as Aléxios V. In March–April the Crusaders and Venetians attacked once more; the Varangians fought stubbornly, but after a gate was forced on 11 April and some 60 Crusaders got through other defenders panicked. On the night of 13 April, Mourtzouphlos also fled the city; soon afterwards the Byzantines laid down their arms, and even the Varangians, lacking a legitimate emperor to defend, finally submitted. The Crusaders subjected Constantinople to a hideous three-day sacking; for nearly 60 years the heart of the shattered Empire would be ruled by ‘Latin’ princes, while exile Byzantine leaders created warring successor states in Nicaea, Epirus and other outlying possessions.

* * *

After the fall of Constantinople there are indications that a unit of Varangian guardsmen served the empire-in-exile in Nicaea from 1205 to 1261, and also in the Despotate of Epirus. The fame of the regiment was such that even the ‘Latin’ Emperor of Constantinople had his personal regiment of Varangians. During the 13th century, when the Epirotes, the Franks, the Angevins and the restored Empire of the Palaiologi all contended for the enclave of Dyrrachium and Ioannina, there are mentions of Varangians as commanders and cavalry leaders there. Their last mention concerns a battle between Byzantines and Angevins, where the names of Varangian officers, the steps in their military careers and even their weapons are recorded.

After the restoration of Constantinople as the capital under the Palaiologos dynasty in 1261, the Varangians served once more as the main palace unit, but they no longer enjoyed their earlier prestige. The sources

The front, left front, and a detail of a Byzantine helmet from Vatra Moldovitei, late 12th–beginning of 13th century. This exceptional specimen, with inlaid decoration in gilded brass – including a crowned figure carrying a shield, low on the left front – presents a striking similarity with helmets shown in the Vatopedi Codex of similar date. Such helmets were probably issued to the Varangians during the defence of Constantinople in 1203–04. See reconstruction in our Plate F4. (Photos courtesy Prof Victor Spinei)

mention their participation in the battle of Makriplagi in 1264. The following year the Bulgarian tsar ambushed a Byzantine army and besieged them in the small town of Ainos; he offered the garrison their lives and allowed them to keep the town in return for releasing the captured former Seljuk Sultan of Rum, Azz-Ed-In. Varangians in Ainos agreed; when a relief force arrived the next day the furious Emperor Michael VIII had them flogged, dressed in women's clothing, and led on donkeys around the streets of Constantinople. Nevertheless, until 1272 the emperor employed the Varangians extensively in campaigns to recover territories in Anatolia and the Balkans.

The Betrayal of Christ, in an early 13th-century fresco in the church of St John at Arabissos – today Karsi Kilise, Suves, Turkey. The frescoes were probably painted in c.1212 to celebrate the victory of Nicaean soldiers over the Turks at Antioch, Pisidia. These frescoes are valuable images of troops of the Nicaean Empire; here we have a possible representation of Varangians, since they have red hair and beards, long axes, and dark red tunics. The enlarged section reproduced on the title page of this book shows in more detail the decoration of axe- and spear-shafts. (Author's photo)

14th–15th centuries

The main references to the Varangians in the 14th century are linked to ceremonial court and guard duties within the city. They are mentioned by Kantakouzenos as bodyguards on several occasions, in 1316, 1328, 1330 and 1341. Apart from such palace duties the once elite regiment no longer performed important military functions; but the Varangians continued to serve, and in the late 14th century they are recorded as a regiment of the Guard beside the *Eskoubitores* (MM *Acta*, II, 50, 476, 485, 554). There is even some evidence that English mercenaries and *Varangopouloi* (i.e. mixed-blood descendants of Varangians) fought beside the emperors like the guardsmen of old in the last decades of Constantinople. In a letter of June 1402 the Emperor John VII wrote to King Henry IV of England that some English warriors were active in the defence of the city against the Turks. 'Axe-bearing soldiers of British race' are referred to by Byzantine envoys in Rome as late as 1404, during the reign of Manuel II Palaiologos.

ETHNIC COMPOSITION

The earliest name given to them in medieval Greek was *Tavroskythai* (Psellos, I, 13), but also *Rhos*, *Rhosi* (s. Attaielates, *Historiae*, 63: 'Tauro-Scythians, who in common speech are called Rhosi...'). Originally the Guard was drawn primarily from the Rus, but very soon other Scandinavians such as Norwegians, Icelanders and Swedes joined the ranks; these were followed, in the second half of the 11th century, by Danes and Englishmen, or Britons of Viking descent. The army sent to Italy in 1009 already comprised 'Dani, Rossi and Gualani', i.e. Danes, Russians and (perhaps) Welsh or Vlachs (Leo of Ostia, *Chronicon Monasterii Cassinensis*, 555 ff), so the first two of these contingents might have been part of the Varangian Guard. Most of the 6,000 warriors sent by Vladimir to Basil II probably spoke Norse, since they were originally recruited from Norway and Sweden to help Vladimir take possession of his throne.

Initially they were probably all called Rus or Rhos, but gradually the Byzantine sources



begin to differentiate between Slavonic Russians and Scandinavians, who were most commonly called *Varangoi*, Varangians. This term, which meant Norsemen in general, soon became synonymous with mercenaries of Norse origin. Down to the time of the Komnenian emperors most writers used the terms Rhos and Varangoi indiscriminately for men of Norse origin. Liutprand of Cremona, in his report to the Emperor Otto I of his visit to Constantinople, wrote that he met 'the Russians whom we call by the other name of Norsemen'. By contrast, the *Stratêgikon* of Kekaumenos (30, 5) lists in the garrison of Taranto both Rhos and Varangians as two distinct units of mercenaries. In the imperial constitutions of Michael Dukas (1075) and Nikêphôros III (1079), the Rhos and the Varangians appear as two separate bodies in the list of the mercenary regiments.

For the Scandinavians it became a family tradition to serve in the Guard, which at times contained within its ranks Nordic princes and chieftains' sons (curiously, even Scandinavian sources seem to recognize the emperors as having a superior status to their local rulers). Many famous warriors from Denmark, Norway and Sweden were attracted to Constantinople by the chance to make a fortune by serving in the Guard; the most famous of them was the young Harald Sigurdson (*Hardrada*, the 'Stern-Ruler'), the youngest brother of St Olaf. Later the King of Norway and invader of England, who died on the battlefield of Stamford Bridge in 1066, this 'last of the royal Vikings' was even recorded in the *Stratêgikon* of Kekaumenos (c.246 p.97), where the author calls Norway 'Varangia'. Harald 'admired the might of the Romans', and, when he was 23 years old, brought with him an army of 500 men from Ukraine to join the Guard, although these Northerners spoke mainly Norse. He served from 1035 to 1044, commanding his contingent in Sicily under the command of Maniakes, and in Anatolia.

Anglo-Saxons and Danes

After about 1070 the Varangian-Russian units in the imperial army were filled out or replaced with Anglo-Saxons. The date and extent of English service in the Varangian Guard are much debated among scholars, but Anglo-Saxons are clearly attested in the Guard from the end of the 11th century.

Men such as the pretender Edward Atheling and his retinue followed the migration of Englishmen eastwards after the conquest of their island by William of Normandy in 1066. Englishmen driven into exile by the Normans welcomed the chance to fight again, either in the Guard or in the garrisons on the Black Sea. There, in the Dobroudja, a short-lived Anglo-Saxon settlement called by the Varangians 'Nova Anglia' was created at the end of 11th century. Carrying their own banners, both Englishmen and Norsemen offered their service as recruits for the imperial bodyguard. The chronicler Ordericus Vitalis recorded that 'the English were much distressed by their loss of liberty... A number of them, with the fresh bloom of youth upon them, went to distant lands'. The influx of Saxons was useful for propaganda purposes; both Anna Komnêna and Kinnamos were able to hark back to Britain's time as a Roman province, and thus to imply a continuity of fealty to the Empire. According to Nikêphôros Bryennios (I, 20) and Kekaumenos (242, 95, 8), from c.1070–80 the *Varangoi* from the British Isles formed



A detail from the Council of Nicaea frescoes in the Church of the Blachernae, Arta. The frescoes in this magnificent church, the glory of the Despotate of Epirus, date from the second half of the 13th century, but represent Constantine the Great surrounded by bodyguards. They are depicted with long blond or red hair and beards; shields, and red and white cloaks, with edges decorated with white gemstones; and ringmail armour. The frescoes are a precious source for Varangians during the century following the fall of Constantinople to the Crusaders and Venetians. (Photo courtesy Dr Andrea Babuin)

the core of the imperial bodyguard. (However, authors such as Du Cange propose a provenance for recruits from 'the land of Angles' as being from the European mainland between Jutland and Holstein, suggesting that they offered their service to the emperor after Harald Hardrada's fatal expedition to England.)

Some of these refugees became an important component of the Varangian Guard who fought at the battle of Dyrrachium (1081), and they are expressly mentioned by Gaudefroï de Malaterre (III, 27): *Angli vero, quos Waringos appellant* – 'Indeed the English, whom they call Warangi...'. Apparently the Englishmen were the most trusted element of the Guard under Alexiós I. We cannot say how many Englishmen were among the Varangians who fought in the battle of Drastar. Anna Komnêna (II) called them 'the Barbarians of the island of Thule', meaning Scandinavia but without excluding the British Isles in the wide meaning of the term; her husband Bryennios said that they came from 'a far barbarian country, nearby the Ocean'. The presence of the English guardsmen is finally attested in an imperial document referring to Patmos on Crete and dated 1088 (*Ius Graeco-Romanum*, III, 878).

We are told that both English and Danes were enlisted in significant numbers well into the 12th century. The proportion of Englishmen to that of the always-present Scandinavians increased, and 11th-century travellers heard English spoken in the streets of Constantinople. When a pilgrim from Canterbury visited in about 1090 on his return from Jerusalem he found 'some Englishmen, friends of his, members of the imperial household'. Saxo Grammaticus, writing in 1102, stated that the emperor's guard was composed of men speaking the Danish language; and Snorri Sturluson recorded 'a great many Northmen' taking service with Alexiós in 1112. Although its earliest use is only attested in 1272, it may have been this earlier period that gave rise to the term *Englinovarangoi* – 'English Varangians'. Kinnamos remembers that the Emperor John II Komnênós was followed by 'a man of British race' armed with an axe, probably meaning the leader the Varangians, the *Akolouthos*. The Palace Guard of John II was composed of Norsemen, Russians and Anglo-Saxons. In relation to the Varangians, Pachymeres writes of 'those who are chosen amongst the English'; and Ordericus Vitalis, writing c.1130, clearly records Englishmen serving the emperor. At that time the term *Varangoi* was used of Germanic mercenaries – 'the bodyguards of Germanic race who bear on the shoulder single-edged axes' (Choniates, IX, 5); but in c.1180 Kinnamos states quite specifically that the Varangians were 'of British race'.

The presence of Englishmen did not, of course, stop the recruitment of Scandinavians. During the visit of King Erik of Denmark in 1103 some of his retinue probably joined the Guard; and according to the *Heimskringla*, when King Sigurd of Norway went on crusade in 1108 with 60 ships and returned overland via Constantinople, many of the Norwegians who accompanied him did so specifically in order to take service with the emperor. In 1153 the Earl of Orkney went on crusade with 15 ships, and the crews of six of them split away at Gibraltar and entered the Guard. Villardouin mentions Danes and Englishmen in the defence of Constantinople in 1204 (p. 67, §§171 and 185). Mid to late 12th-century frescoes of military saints painted in Byzantine style survived as far away as Kallunge church in Iceland, attesting to the

return there of Varangians after service in Byzantium, but English and Scots were the main components of the Guard during the 13th and 14th centuries. As mentioned above, the word *Englinovarangoi* can be dated with certainty by 1272 from a document of Michael VIII, and in other sources the term is abbreviated to *Inglinoi*. Some also mention *Keltai Pelekophoroi*, 'garrisons of Celts'. Pseudo-Kodinos (VII, 12) remembers that in 1351 the Varangians greeted the emperor in their own language of English.

ORGANIZATION

It is not clear exactly when the Norsemen were transformed from an elite mercenary unit of the field army into the emperor's personal guard. Following Blondal and Benediktz, since most of the foreign mercenaries who served in the army were probably at first incorporated in the *Megali Hetairia*, one of the bodies of the Imperial Guard, the first Norse and Russians to take service as imperial bodyguards may well have belonged to it. Basil II may also have set up a regular Varangian unit within the Hetairia; Psellos (I, 9) clearly states that 'The Emperor Basil ... since a selected force of Tauro-Scythians had recently joined him ... trained them and put them in a division with other foreign troops'. The *Tactika* of Nikêphoros Ouranós (AD 990–1000) also seems to give prominence to the emperor's taking this special unit of 'Rhos' with him on his Bulgarian campaigns. There are two passages (21, 44; 31, 44) in which this is suggested; in the first the author writes that the unit of Rhos, together with the archers and heavily armed troops, always accompanied Basil; in the other it is stated that the unit was used sometimes as infantry, sometimes as cavalry.

The presence of horses in Basil II's Russian contingent is also confirmed by the quarrel at Havic in the year 1000 described by Asochik (II, 165), but it is evident from the same source that horses were used for transport by men who fought on foot: 'a certain soldier from the Russian infantry was carrying hay for his horse...'. Of course, the passage may refer to a baggage pack-horse, and is not evidence for the whole contingent being used as either cavalry or infantry. It is clear from Anna's account of Dyrrachium that horses were used for transport to the battlefield, but at the battle of Petroe in 1057 at least some Varangians fought on horseback.

Numbers

Basil II's Russian contingent in 989–990 numbered about 6,000 men, and not less than 4,000. The number of 6,000 is still recorded for the Rus accompanying him on the Armenian campaign of 999–1000, and also for the Varangians defending Constantinople in 1203. The smallest number is given for the field armies:

Varangian guardsman illustrated in a late 11th-century fresco of the Betrayal. The soldier is shown as having red hair, wearing a close-fitting military tunic (*himation*) in dark red, and wielding a medium-sized battleaxe (*tzikourion*) one-handed. (Panaghia Myriokephala, Crete; author's photo)



of 3,000 Varangians sent to Armenia, 700–800 were still there at the end of the same year. The numbers fluctuated following various battles: at Dyrrachium a number of 1,400 has been proposed by Haldon (out of the total of 5,000–6,000 casualties in the whole army). For John II's army against the Pechenegs at the battle of Eski Zagra one source gives 4,500 Varangians, but others mention only 540. In 1195, Isaac Angelos Komnênós sent a request to the kings of the three Scandinavian kingdoms hoping to get 1,000 men from each. According to Heath, the Guard was probably about 3,000 strong from the mid-11th century to the close of the 12th. In the reorganized Byzantine army of the Nicaean Empire the Varangians and the *Vardariotai* were the mainstay of the *Taxis* (the army nucleus). Pseudo-Kodinos records that after 1261 the full strength of the *Taxis* was 6,000 men, consisting of 12 *allaghia* of 500 men, which may suggest that Varangians and *Vardariotai* probably numbered c.3,000 each.

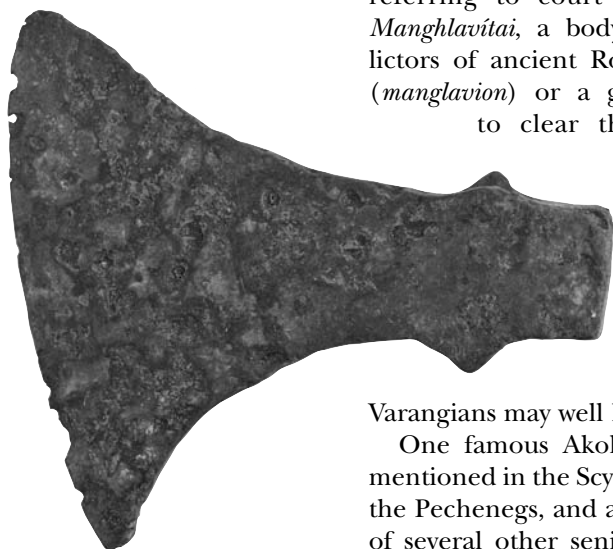
Command

The commander of the Guard was the *Akolouthos* (lit. 'the follower', i.e. the man nearest to the emperor's person on formal occasions). This officer originally came from the Imperial *Vighla*, one of the *Tághmata* regiments of the Imperial Guard, and was in charge of all the foreigners in the army; he later specifically took on the command of the new palace regiment. He was not necessarily a Rus or a Norseman, but was either a man speaking their language or was accompanied by an interpreter. The *Akolouthos* soon became one of the most significant imperial officers, to whom the keys of Constantinople were given when the emperor was absent. In the 14th century the extent of the decline of the regiment is clear from the fact that the *Akolouthos* who had originally walked directly behind the emperor in procession was now only 50th in precedence.

The interpreters of the Varangians were under the command of the *Megalodihermeneutes* or Grand Interpreter, an official of considerable rank, and the junior officers were called *Primikerioi*. These titles later became honorific or interchangeable with others referring to court duties. This was the case with the imperial *Manghlavítai*, a body of guardsmen which probably succeeded the lictors of ancient Rome. The *Manghlavítai* were armed with a club (*manglavion*) or a golden whip, which they carried in procession to clear the way for the imperial retinue. They were commanded by a *Protospatharios* ('first of the imperial sword-bearers'), an officer of high court rank. After distinguishing himself in Sicily, Harald Sigurdson held the rank of *Manghlavites* before being appointed *Spatharokandidatos*, i.e. second in rank after the *Protospatharios*. A 14th-century seal of the *Akolouthos* Stephanos also suggests that Varangians may well have been employed as *Manghlavítai*.

One famous *Akolouthos* of the Varangians was Mikhail/Michael, mentioned in the Scylitzès MS (472.40–41) in the war of 1050–53 against the Pechenegs, and also attested from mid-11th century seals as holder of several other senior appointments. In one group of seals Mikhail

This axehead, roughly trapezoidal in shape and measuring c.5.1in by 4.7in (13 by 12cm), is similar to that shown being wielded by a presumed Varangian illustrated in the 11th-century Panaghia Myriocephala fresco in Crete.



is termed *anthypatos*, *patrikios*, *akolouthos* and *anthropos* of the emperor; in the second group he is *protostrategos*, i.e. commander-in-chief of an imperial army, an appointment that he held in both 1050 and 1053. In Armenia in 1054 he led the Varangians and Franks to victory over the Seljuks of Toghrol-bek.

Nabites or Nambites, who commanded Varangians at the battles of Dyrrachium and Drastar (*Alex. VII*, 3,6), was actually the only one of more than ten known commanders of the Varangian Guard in the 11th century whose name suggests a pure Scandinavian origin. But was he really the Akolouthos? Anna Komnêna calls him *Ighimon* or *Archon tis Varanghias* (I, 155 and II, 97), so he could have been just the commander of the detachment of Varangians that accompanied Aléxios I on his military expeditions. Some scholars give him a more important position than that of Harald Sigurdson, who was only Spatharokandidatos and leader of a small military detachment in the Sicilian campaign. The name suggests a Germanic (even Anglo-Saxon?) origin: Nabites/Nambites might be the Greek transcription of *nàbitr* (corpse-biter, or 'the killer'); Blondal compares this with other Norse pseudonyms referring to wild beasts or birds of prey, e.g. Wulf, Haukr or Ulfr. At Dyrrachium in 1081 Nambites strongly recommended the emperor to attack the Normans. On the disastrous battlefield of Drastar in 1087 he was one of the six men to whom the Emperor Aléxios entrusted his own defence, which might suggest that he was, at least by this date, the commander of the Varangians rather than a subordinate officer. His bungling at Drastar may have been what provoked a strong remonstrance against the granting of senior military commands to barbarians, and Drastar is the last occasion when Nambites is mentioned in historical sources.

Standards and flags

Blondal and Benediktz suggest that the standard of the old *Excubitores* of the Imperial Guard was inherited by the Varangians. The *Excubitores*' standard bearers were called *drakonarioi*, i.e. they still carried the dragon standard of the Late Roman Empire, and this is attested by the *De Ceremoniis* of Constantine Porphyrogenitus. Since it is highly probable that the Varangians replaced the *Excubitores* as imperial bodyguards (although the latter are still mentioned as a military body in the later period), it is also possible that they took over this standard. The *draco* was a hollow bronze sculpture of a dragon-head, into which was inserted a tubular 'windsock' of coloured silk sections, stitched together and often embroidered. Such standards are well illustrated in 11th-century sources, including the Bayeux Tapestry, where it is carried by the Anglo-Saxon



Late 11th-century axehead recovered near Drastar, Bulgaria. This specimen measures 7.4in by 4.3in (19 by 11cm), and corresponds to some examples found in the territory of the Kievan Rus. (Photo courtesy Prof Boyan Totev)

Varangian guardsmen, identified by their long axes, sail into the attack on ships. The pennon-shaped flags are of red and yellow brocade. (Folio 136r, *Cod. Ath. Esphigmenou* 14; Esphigmenoi Monastery, Mt Athos; ex-Kolias)



housecarls of King Harold Godwinson. That it was also adopted by the Varangians may be supported by a virtually identical image carved into an external wall of the 11th-century church of Mesopotami in modern Albania, in the area where the English Varangians played an important part in resistance to the Norman attacks. Company banners, known as *banda* or *flamoula*, were also carried by *bandophoroi*. An 11th-century image (folio 136r, *Cod. Ath. Esphigmenou* 14) shows attacking guardsmen with axes holding a small *flamoulon* of decorated red brocade, on a brown shaft with a silver spearhead.

Varangian flags of the mid-12th century are illustrated in the famous miniatures on folio 26v A of the Skilitzès MS. Four typical *banda* are small squared cloths with streamers (*flamoula*). The three longer banners are identical, the small dark blue fields having two dark blue streamers flanking a central 'flame' in bright red. The other, shorter three-tailed banner seems to show a black 'cross potent' or 'molin' on a red field, although this has been obscured by deterioration. The poles of the banners are painted in red and light brown, and have effective iron spear-heads of 'squared', i.e. diamond outline.

Service in the field

As the imperial bodyguard the Varangians were usually kept close to the emperor, forming the feared 'Varangians of the City' who kept Constantinople secure. However, when the emperor rode out to war a strong contingent of the Varangians always accompanied him; and detachments were also dispersed away from the emperor's presence as shock troops with field armies, as fort garrisons, and on maritime duties. Some very sparse sources also suggest the existence of Thematic Varangians, i.e. units which lived and served permanently in the provinces.

The sources give various examples of Varangians being sent to theatres of war throughout Byzantine territories. Kedhrênós (508.19–20 and 608.18–19) remembers Varangians dispersed in the thema of Thrakêsion, and Franks and Varangians scattered in winter quarters in Chaldia. Some 300 to 500 Varangians were charged

Varangian guardsmen, end of 12th century, in a detail from the Scylitzès MS, folio 26v A. Note the three-tailed red flag at centre left, which bears some kind of cross in black; and the long *flamoula* standards, the flames in dark blue flanking red. The soldiers in these miniatures have typical Byzantine equipment, depicted here in yellow: *kassidia* helmets with *peritrachilia* aventails; *thorakia heroika* muscle-cuirasses for officers; and long *thorakia pholidota* scale armours. They carry mostly round shields (the central one here is reconstructed in Plate F1), spears of both Mediterranean and Nordic shapes, and the usual long axes. (Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid; ex-Kolias)



by Aléxios Komnênós to defend Kastoria, in north-west Macedonia, against the Norman attack of 1081 (*Gauf. Mal.*, III, 29). The Varangians had a fundamental importance in the garrison of Dyrrachium, especially in 1070–80 but still in the 13th century. Another garrison was perhaps installed at Amphipolis, Macedonia. Choniates remembers (IX, 11) at the time of Andronikós Komnênós the presence in Crete of guardsmen of Celtic race armed with axes, under the orders of the local *Dasmologos*. It is not clear, however, if such units were permanent garrisons of Varangians, or if they were just sent to perform a specific task and recalled once it had been accomplished. Under the later Palaiologian dynasty detachments of Varangians are recorded serving as garrison troops at strategic points such as Kalaura in Thrace, Cibetot on the Anatolian coastline, and possibly even at Cherson in Crimea.

Prominent members of the Guard were also appointed to command troops on campaign, especially when, in their early period, the Varangians were sent to deal with revolts or enemies across the border; e.g., in the 11th century a detachment of regular troops operating in Greece was led by a guardsman named Ragnvald. (It may have been on this occasion that a Varangian guardsman chiseled runic inscriptions upon a marble lion then in Athens, and later destined to be taken to Venice. Other scholars believe that it was carved by some Varangian accompanying Basil II in his triumphal entry into Athens in 1018.)

Because of their backgrounds as seafarers, Varangians were often embarked on light vessels called *ousiai*, and were employed for suppressing piracy and other naval duties. The fleet often employed foreign mercenaries, and many Russians and Varangians who entered imperial service actually began their time in the navy. From the saga of Harald Sigurdson we know that he was to pay the emperor 100 marks for every pirate vessel he was able to capture, but could keep the rest for himself and his men. Varangians are also likely to have been part of the garrison of the naval base established at Paphos in Cyprus. In the time of Manuel I, imperial triremes carrying ‘men who bear on their shoulders single-edged axes’ followed Venetian ships that escaped from Constantinople in 1171 (Choniates VI, 5).

The Guard in battle

Little is known about the tactics and battle formations of the Varangians, which may well have varied quite widely over the years. On the battlefield the Varangians fought as the elite infantry in a mostly defensive function, usually near the emperor in order to protect him, but very little is known about their actual deployment and role in combat.

According to Malaterra, at Dyrrachium in 1081 the Varangians, drawn up in two columns, were positioned (at their own request) at the front of the Byzantine battle

Varangian swords of the late 10th–first half of 11th century, from Balkan sites. The complete upper specimen (Type K, by Petersen's classification), was found in the fortress near the village of Opaka, Targovishte district; it has a quadrangular pommel like a sword from Hedeby, and attests the presence of a garrison of Varangians. Three swords of Petersen's Types E/W, V and X, found on the Danube fortress-island of Pacuiul Lui Soare, also date from this period. Other 11th–12th century finds also attest the presence of the Guard in the Balkans: a pommel from Veliki Preslav, a blade from north-east Bulgaria, and an intact sword from the village of Govedza, Montana region. (Author's photos, courtesy of Constanza Archaeological Museum, Romania)



array, defending the centre commanded by the emperor himself, with the *Vardariotai* forming the second line behind them. Aléxios Komnênós intended to send these horse-archers against Guiscard first, having instructed the Varangian commander Nambites to open his ranks for them by moving quickly to right and left whenever they wanted to advance, and to close ranks again and march forward in close order when they had withdrawn. This reported deployment is an example of the tactical combination of missile and shock troops in Aléxios' army. At the battle of Drastar the Varangians formed the reserve behind the centre of heavy Latin mercenary infantry; they probably also had the role of defending the imperial baggage-train, and this explains why much Norse armour and equipment has been found near Drastar.

When on campaign the Varangian Guard also had the privilege of being the first to plunder a conquered city. This privilege may have been the reason why in much later times the Varangians were still charged with the duty of keeping, in the imperial presence, the keys of submitted cities, though not all scholars agree with this interpretation.

GUARD SERVICE

As elite bodyguards the Varangians participated in all imperial ceremonies and accompanied the emperor everywhere. They were responsible for guarding the bronze doors of the Great Palace (Choniates, I, 4), and the emperor's other properties. According to Pseudo-Kodinos they were also responsible for guarding the emperor's office and chief reception chambers in the Blachernae Palace, where they stood around his throne during receptions. Their attendance on the emperor when he attended church in state is documented by Pseudo-Kodinos for the 14th century, and Kantakouzenos (I, 41 p.200) describes these axe-bearers at the coronation of Andronikos III on 2 February 1325 in Haghia Sophia. The presence of the Varangians in Haghia Sophia much earlier, in the 11th-century 'golden age' of the regiment, is confirmed by graffiti. On the marble upper balustrade of the southern gallery of the cathedral one Varangian scratched with his axe the inscription 'Halfdan was here'; there are also other runic scrawls, and another in the south gallery mentions a certain 'Are', a very common name in Iceland.

The Guard also performed police duties in Byzantium, where they were particularly disliked as alien 'enforcers' of imperial policies or commands. Their personal loyalty to the emperor and immunity from local sympathies made them especially useful for delicate tasks like arresting people with high religious or aristocratic status. For the same reason they were also used as jailers, especially in the dreaded Nóumera prison attached to the Great Palace. Peter Beatson has noted an interesting link between the iconography and written sources in this regard. The guards in paintings or mosaics of the Betrayal of Christ in Gethsemane are often represented as Varangians; and in the 12th century Michael Glykas wrote these lines of a poem from personal experience: 'Hades I call the Numera, and even worse than Hades/... And the shouting Varangoi and terror keep you awake...'. Their continuing employment as prison guards is attested for the reigns

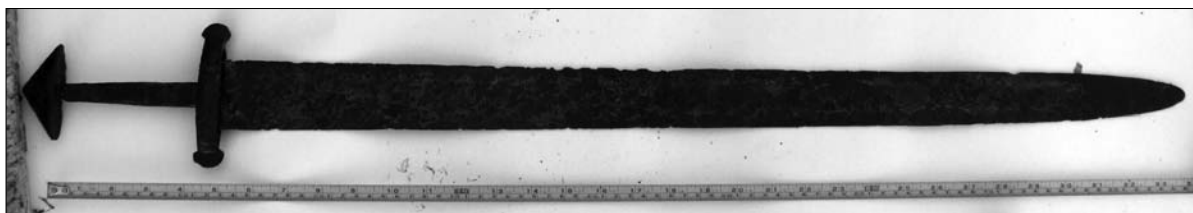
of Michael VIII Palaiologos and Andronikos II, together with the related duty of torturing prisoners according to imperial commands. Interestingly, Pachymeres (II, 103) reports that in 1299 'the chief (*epistates*) of the rest of the guards' was a certain Erres ek Englinon – i.e., 'Harry from England'!

Character, rewards and reputation

The Varangians were famous for their blind loyalty to the emperor ('the Garth King', as he is called in the *Laxdaela Saga*), and even in the worst moments of the Empire the Varangians showed a fidelity beyond that of all other regiments of the Imperial Guard. When, in March 1081, Aléxiós Komnênós decided to seize the throne and his army appeared before Constantinople, the city was defended only by the *Athanatoi* and the Varangian Guards, plus a detachment of Germans defending the Charisian Gate. The Guard was Aléxiós' major concern, and, believing that it would be impossible to persuade or coerce them, he bribed the Germans to open the gate. Although the Varangians stayed faithful, the Emperor Nikêphóros III Bothoniates decided to abdicate rather than risk a bloody civil war.

The Varangians were extremely well paid, and entry to the regiment actually had to be purchased for a substantial sum in gold. An aspiring Varangian who had successfully made the long and dangerous journey to the Great City with cash in hand probably still had to pass some kind of selection process designed to maintain the quality of the regiment, with unsuccessful applicants being shunted off to some other mercenary unit. This high entrance fee opened the way to considerable later riches, as the Varangians' regular pay and extra bonuses were far above those paid to the rest of the army. Once enlisted, all soldiers paid by the central treasury – including foreign units employed as mercenaries, and individual Varangian guardsmen – were registered in the military rolls held by the relevant government department. Their wage rate has been calculated by Benedikz and Blondal, based on the rate paid in the *Megali Hetairia*, as *c.*40 *nomismata* (gold *aurei*) per month, and by other authors as 30 *nomismata*. The stable economy allowed the gold *nomisma/aureus* to keep its value for centuries, and to be used as an international currency as far away as Scandinavia. In the case of Harald Sigurdson, the Norse source suggests that he and his followers were enrolled individually into the Varangian division, and were in consequence paid their wages on the traditional basis (*Logos Nouthetitikos*, 97.2ff; *Saga of Harald Sigurdson* III, 70ff). In the division of the spoils of war the Varangians were also the favourites, from the very beginning; after the capture of Longon and the sacking of the Pelagonian fields in 1016 the emperor took one-third of the booty and gave one-third to his *symmachousi Rhos*, while the final third was divided

Sword of Varangian guardsman found near Drastar, Bulgaria. This exceptional intact example of a weapon from the end of the 11th century has a total length of 34.25in (87cm) and a hilt length of 6.1in (15.5cm). The guard is typical of an Eastern Roman sword, and is similar to one found at Nordre Kalstad, but the pommel is of a typical Viking shape, of Petersen's Type H. This is valuable evidence for mixed influences in the equipment of these imperial bodyguard troops. (Photos courtesy Prof Boyan Totev)



among the rest of the army (Kedhrênós-Scylitzès, II, 466). (Besides the share of the booty the sources mention a '*pólútasvarf*' as a source of income particular to the Varangians.) To such formal awards we must add the Varangians' wide opportunities to enrich themselves by sacking and pillage. Harald Sigurdson is said to have amassed the greatest personal fortune ever yet owned by a Northern European; the prodigious quantities of loot that he sent or brought home when he returned to Norway became legendary, allowing him to extend his power over that country. Moreover, besides the usual gifts on the accession of a new emperor, the guardsmen were traditionally allowed to perform a ritual 'raid' on the emperor's chambers.

The descriptions of the Varangians' imposing stature and warlike prowess were undoubtedly true. The late 12th-century Scylitzès MS shows full beards, large moustaches and abundant dark hair. The tattooing of hands and arms up to the shoulder, as well as faces, was a Rus/Varangian fashion adopted from the Turks and very often practised by the guardsmen. There is a description by Psellos (II,89ff) in 1057: 'Next them stood men from the foreign mercenaries ... Tauro-Scythians, terrible of aspect and huge of body. The soldiers were ... blue-eyed ... the Varangians kept their natural complexion ... the Varangians fight like madmen, as if ablaze with wrath ... they do not care about their wounds, and they despise their bodies' [i.e. they paid no heed to comfort]. A second reference to the Varangians serving the Emperor Manuel I, in the panegyric of Michael Italicus (X,2), mentions 'northern people with sky-blue eyes who hold single-edged axes'.

In the 11th and 12th centuries the reputation of the Varangian Guard formed an important pillar of imperial ideology. Byzantine chroniclers exalted the legends of these hardy warriors lured from the furthest edge of the known world by tales of the glory of New Rome and its ruler, and gaining huge fortunes by their loyalty and courage. The spectacular city itself, the wealth and technologies available to its rulers, and the most exciting social and political life of their age all had, in their turn, an incalculable impact on those Norsemen who were willing to travel so far from home and accept the discipline of the Guard. Byzantium has even been identified as an inspiration for Norse descriptions of Asgard, the home of the Nordic gods. Harald Hardrada's time in the Guard became an important part of his royal mythology, which made much of the transferred glory of the emperors by exaggerating Harald's position and the honours given to him.

The Varangians claimed a great sense of honour and their uprightness was famous, as in the case of the fate of the guardsmen who tried to kill the Emperor Nikêphóros III; the Varangians were unique in having the right to judge their own members. One episode narrated by Kedhrênós, who draws upon the Scylitzès MS written in the late 12th century, is the earliest mention of the name *Varangoi* in Greek medieval sources. It recounted that during a campaign in Western Anatolia in 1034, 'a man of the Varangians, who were scattered in winter quarters in the Thrakêsion Thema, met a woman of the region in a private place and tempted her virtue; and when he could not get her to agree willingly he tried to rape her, but she got hold of a spear and struck him through the heart, killing him on the spot. When this deed became known through the neighbourhood the Varangians gathered

together and honoured the woman by giving her all the possessions of the man who had attempted to rape her, and they threw his body away without burial, according to the law regarding suicides.'

Needless to add, not all sources show the Varangians as pillars of virtue. The tales of Armenian (Aristakès, 23–24) and Georgian authors relating to the campaigns of Basil II describe horrific atrocities committed by the emperor's Western mercenaries (i.e. Germanics and Varangians) during the execution of the imperial order to kill every man, woman and child in at least 12 districts, a grisly task that they took three months to accomplish.

There were also exceptions to the Varangians' legendary loyalty to the emperors at times when there was popular discontent, especially when Varangian disaffection coincided with a questionably legitimate succession. In 1042 the Guard spearheaded the overthrow of Michael V, provoked by his policies and his attempts to purge the legitimate imperial family, but especially by his imprisonment of Harald Sigurdson and two close associates on (probably justified) charges of misappropriation of imperial booty and tax-farming. Michael consigned the Dowager Empress Zoe to a monastery on false charges of treason, and tried to have the Patriarch killed (Ibn al-Athir, IX, 172); but the Patriarch managed to gather Varangian guardsmen and Byzantine nobles around himself and the dowager empress. According to Psellos (V, 25) 'the body of foreign mercenaries that the emperors are traditionally accustomed to keeping at court, i.e. the Tauro-Scythians', reinstated Zoe on the throne, and Michael was blinded – according to the saga, by Harald himself. The episode shows that the Guard valued legitimate succession in the Western manner almost as much as simple incumbency.

Everyday life and quarters

In Byzantium the Varangians were almost as famous for their liking for wine as for their blind loyalty to the emperor; although wine from the Mediterranean was exported to Russia and Scandinavia the guardsmen now had unprecedented access to it. In contemporary sources they are called 'the emperor's wineskins', and both Byzantine and Bulgarian sources are full of stories about Varangian drunkenness. Sometimes this had serious consequences, as in instances when drunken guardsmen made attacks on the Emperors Michael VII and Nikêphóros III Bothoniates. The Varangians shared the Byzantines' love for the brothels and the Greek beauties, for chariot races and spectacles in the Hippodrome, and they sometimes even became involved in the bloody quarrels between the four factions of Circus supporters.

They were stationed in the capital as part of the Tagmatic or permanent army. Early on they appear to have entered the quarters



Miniatures from the Scylitzès MS, folio 208r; these depict the episode in 1034 when an Anatolian woman killed a Varangian would-be rapist in self-defence, and was later presented with his clothing and goods by his comrades. The right-hand image offers a good impression of the Varangians' appearance, and is a source for our Plates D2–D4. (Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid; ex-Hoffmeyer)

of the *Eskoubitores*, and had the use of their accommodation in the old palaces, where the main entry route led through or past their quarters. Zonarás (III, 763) refers to John Komnênós' difficulty in entering the imperial palace past their guardrooms after the death of Aléxios I. Their quartering with some of the *Eskoubitores* regiments does not mean that they replaced them, but it is possible that they may have relieved the *Eskoubitores* of the duties of personal imperial bodyguards.

The regiment was too large to be housed in barracks, however, and so was distributed around the city. They might be accommodated within or outside the walls, perhaps by the seashore in buildings outside the fortifications, or across the Golden Horn at Galata. Since the first treaties with the emperor the Rus had a sanctuary and a dwelling near the monastery of St Mamas, and the harbour named after the same saint was allocated to them for their ships. According to Pargoire the quarters of the Rhos were there, and probably this place continued to be a residence for the Varangians during the high days of the Guard.

The Varangians had their own churches in Constantinople, for reasons both of faith and propaganda; the imperial elite had to show some piety, reflecting the sanctity of the purple. The Norse kingdoms had all been Christianized by the first decade of the 11th century, and the original force of Varangians from Kiev were mostly Christians – after all, their despatch was linked with the marriage of Princess Anna to Grand Prince Vladimir, and the conversion of the Rus to the Orthodox faith. The Russians had had the church of St Elias since the first half of the 10th century; the first specifically Varangian church probably existed from the beginning of the 11th century, but was closed in 1052. The second church, dedicated to St Olaf Haraldson and to the Mother of God, was built not far from Haghia Sofia, traditionally in fulfilment of a vow made by the regiment at the battle of Eski Zagra. It was known as Panaghia Varanghiotissa ('Our Sacred Lady of the Varangians'); according to a legend mentioned in the 13th century by Snorri Sturlusson – though not elsewhere – the sword of St Olaf hung above the altar.

EQUIPMENT AND WEAPONS

The baptized Russians mentioned in *De Ceremoniis* in relation to the reception of 949 carried barbed spears, swords and shields, and even standards from their own land. Vladimir's Rus contingent must initially have fought in their own gear, but when they achieved a reputation as the elite of the Imperial Guard the Varangians must have received the best available equipment from imperial arsenals. The fact that they continued to use some Scandinavian equipment alongside Byzantine issue is clear both from the many mentions, over a long period, of the great Danish axe, and from finds of 10th–12th century Nordic swords, axe- and spear-heads in Bulgaria and Romania, recently presented by Professors Valeri Yotov and Boyan Totev of the Varna Museum. A passage in the *Grettis Saga* suggests a sort of regular kit inspection (*vopnaping*) at which the men's arms and armour were examined.

(continued on page 33)

EARLY VARANGIANS – BATTLE OF ABYDOS, 13 APRIL AD 989

1: Warrior of the Russo-Varangian *druzzhina*

2: Russian Christian warrior

3: Varangian officer

4: Archigos of Byzantine *katafraktoi*



VARANGIANS IN THE BALKANS, 1020-1050

1: Bolli Bollasson

2: Imperial Akolouthos

3: Varangian standard-bearer





DEFEAT AT DRASTAR, 1087
 1: Archon Nambites
 2: Danish Varangian blacksmith
 3, 4 & 5: Varangian guardsmen
 6: Byzantine kataphraktos



VICTORY AT ESKI ZAGRA, 1122
1, 2 & 3: Varangian 'Celtic bodyguards'
4 & 5: Pecheneg cavalrymen
6: Pecheneg woman





THE FALL OF CONSTANTINOPLE, 1204

- 1: English Varangian guardsman
- 2: Russian Varangian guardsman
- 3: Emperor Alexios V Mourtzouphlos
- 4: Varangian Akolouthos with imperial standard
- 5: Danish Varangian guardsman

VARANGIANS AT COURT, 1351
1: Varangian guardsman in full armour
2: Parakimomenos tou Kithoros
3: Megalodiermeneutes



THE LAST GUARDSMEN, 15th CENTURY

- 1: *Varangopoulos*
- 2: English guardsman
- 3: Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos, 1408
- 4: Cretan guardsman



DEFENSIVE EQUIPMENT

Helmets

The helmets worn by the Russian mercenaries and first guardsmen were of *spangenhelm* construction, with the plates joined directly to each other and not to a frame, and sometimes fitted with nasals. Some fine gilded specimens come from burial sites and single finds in modern Ukraine and Poland, e.g. from Gniezdowo (second half of 9th century) and Chernaya Mogyla near Chernigov (10th century); many of this type were fitted with a tubular plume-mount.

Conical helmets with nasals and worn over mail coifs were widely used by 10th to 12th-century guardsmen, and one has been found on the Drastar battlefield.

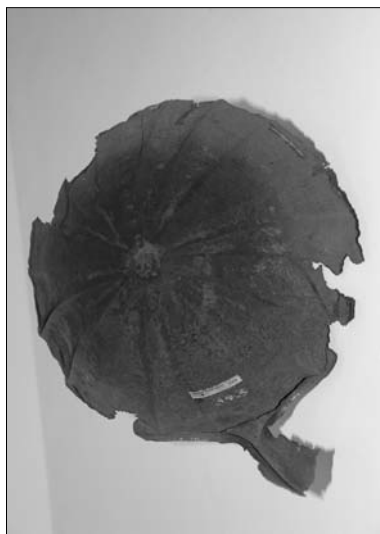
Other helmets made in imperial arsenals were also widely worn, e.g. the 10th-century example from Yassenovo. Folio 26v A in the Scylitzès MS shows some Varangian guardsmen with a type that may be linked to the Late Roman ridge-helmets, whose use by the Guard is also attested by frescoes in the cathedral of St Sophia in Kiev representing Vladimir and his retinue. The helmet is seen in two different versions. The first, visible in the Scylitzès miniature, is basically a simple dome apparently made of concentric arcs of steel riveted one above the other. The second, visible in both sources, is a bowl surmounted by a central ridge and extending downwards at the back. Both helmets present a brow-band shaped like a continuous strip. An original specimen of this helmet was found in Tunisia, probably acquired as war-booty by the Arabs.

The most heavily armoured warriors wore helmets with aventails made of leather, cotton or felt; in the Scylitzès miniatures some Varangian helmets are fitted with a curtain of scales for the neck and shoulders, perhaps identifiable with the *peritrachilion* mentioned in the sources (Leo, *Taktika*, V, 4; *Sylloge Tacticorum*, 38, 5; Pseudo-Konstantinos/Nikephoros Ouranos, *Taktika*, p. 11). Typical of Byzantine helmets, this is usually



Detail of the brows and nasal of the gilded Vatra Moldovitei helmet – see below. (Photo courtesy Prof Victor Spinei)

Front, right side and inside views of a Russo-Byzantine helmet from Vatra Moldovitei, late 12th–early 13th century. This impressive recent find is of gilded iron, and may be associated with the Russian warriors who still enlisted in the Guard at the end of the 12th century. See reconstruction in our Plate F2. (Photos courtesy Prof Victor Spinei)



worn by both infantry and cavalry in the Scylitzés MS, and is represented in many miniatures, other illuminated manuscripts and ivory icons from the 9th century onwards.

Armours

Guardsmen were usually heavily armoured, wearing mainly ringmail (*lorikion*), lamellar and scale armour (*klivanion*, *sosanion*). However, the iconography shows that some also fought lightly equipped, like many other Byzantine infantry.

A long mail shirt (*hauberk*) was widely used. The coarsest mail was made in Russia, with links up to 0.98in (2.5cm) in diameter, while Middle Eastern links ranged from 0.25in to, at most, 0.6in (6mm–15mm); the usual weight for a thigh-length mail shirt was no more than 29.7lb (13.5kg). In *Flateyiarbók* (III, 418) and in the *Ljòsvetninga Saga* (104) it is said that Harald Sigurdson wore a ‘Roman’ armour, called Emma, which protected him down to the calves. This shows that Varangians were equipped with Byzantine armours, and that their commanders would sometimes have adopted the distinctive military garb of Byzantine officers.

Armour was very often used in combination with the so-called Varangian *Bra*, a leather harness consisting of a breast-and-back strap connected by straps passing over each shoulder; this Eastern Roman device is seen in many Byzantine pictorial sources. A reference to these may be found in Leo (*Taktika*, V, 4), where, along with a mention of ringmail, he states that armours should also be held by straps. The transverse strap – probably fastened by a ring at each side, by a rear buckle, or by lacing under the arms – held the mail snugly and prevented it from moving around in battle. Such items, adopted from the Sassanian Persians, were already employed by the Romans under the Late Empire. Pictorial sources also show ringmail being worn under shorter lamellar or scale corselets. Lamellar or scale body armour could be knee-length or waist-length, and was worn over undergarments called *zoupai* – the direct descendants of the Late Roman *thoracomaci* or *peristhiphidia*. The padded *zoupa*, typical of the middle Byzantine period, was made of linen and cotton (Achmet, *Oneirokriticon*, 225, p.177).

To save weight, Byzantine mail corselets were usually relatively short with elbow-length sleeves, and were therefore combined with additional arm and leg defences. Iron splint-armour greaves (*podopsella*) and vambraces (*cheiropsella*) – already a Nordic tradition since the 7th century – came from the imperial arsenals. The vambraces were formed from strips of different lengths, the longer ones running up the outside. The greaves also used different widths of strip; fastened by straps buckled at the back, they were worn with a leather lining and over a padding of linen or felt. (The employment of one-piece plate greaves cannot be excluded, especially during the 13th and 14th centuries.)

Shields

Nikêphóros Bryennios (I, 20) wrote that as warriors of proven loyalty the Varangians were *aspidiforoi*, i.e. furnished with splendid circular shields. The sources mention various

A fallen Varangian in a grisly battlefield scene; note the Danish axe, the sword and the spear. The short (ringmail?) corselet is shown in blue, worn over a long-sleeved, knee-length tunic in pinkish red, over purple hose or trousers, with black boots and scabbard. The shield is deep red with a gold and red border. (Folio 417r, *Cod. Ath. Esphigmenou* 14; *Esphimenoí Monastery, Mt Athos; ex-Kolias*)



shield types (Anna Komnêna, IV, 6; Choniates, I, 5). They were probably at first typically Scandinavian, circular and slightly convex, provided with shoulder straps, and measuring about 30–36in (80–100cm) in diameter. A highly decorated round shield of Byzantine manufacture is recorded in the hands of Bolli Bollasson. It is not unusual in the iconography to find Varangian officers equipped with round shields of Eastern Roman typology, sometimes even small bucklers (*cheiroskoutaria*).

From the 11th century kite-shields of Byzantine shape are also illustrated in the hands of Varangians. The ‘long shields’ mentioned by Choniates as issued to the English Varangians were probably the longer kind of kite-shield visible in early–middle 12th century Western carvings, which were soon adopted by Komnenian cavalry and infantry alike. When a warrior was wielding a two-handed weapon such as the long axe or the *romphaia* the shield must have been laid aside or slung on the back for close combat.

It is not easy to determine blazons used by the Varangians. With reference to the second Rus attack on Constantinople in 907, the Russian history by Prince M. M. Shcherbatov (1733–90) states that ‘Before his departure back to Kiev, Oleg, taking his shield, upon which a riding warrior was represented, hung it on the gates of Galata...’. (It is interesting to compare this with the description of the later shield of Bolli Bollasson – see Plate B1.) Sources for the shields of the Imperial Guard show them as brightly decorated, even with pearls; and more than one shows a device identified as a raven – sacred to Odin, paramount god of the Scandinavian pantheon. It is therefore plausible that this was a distinctive blazon of the Varangian regiment, and what appear to be raven blazons are shown in the Munich enamel and the image from the Reliquary of the True Cross in the Hermitage Museum (see pages 42 and 41). Heath and others have suggested that, notwithstanding their Byzantine uniforms and ostensibly Christian faith, these men may have retained their own shield device from Scandinavia; in *Harald’s Saga* there are references to ‘the ravens’ leaving Russia for Miklagard. Some shields, like that of the centurion in the Nea Moni mosaic (see page 40), also show painted decoration on the inner surface. From the 13th century there is some tentative evidence for the blazons of Varangian shields in graffiti scratched in the Lower Palace of the Byzantine emperors; the inscriptions are on shield images of typical Western ‘heater’ shape.

WEAPONS

Axes

The long axes of the Rus and Varangians gave rise to the epithets by which they were frequently known: the ‘axe-bearers’ or ‘axe-bearing barbarians’ (Choniates, I, 5). The Varangian regiment of the Imperial Guard was closely associated with the long-shafted, two-handed Danish axe with a crescent-shaped edge, and used it throughout their history. In the 11th century its head was of various shapes: the biggest had a wide, slightly angled cutting edge, ensuring a really terrible cut.

The Varangians were called in medieval Greek *pelekypphoroi*, because their main weapon was the *pelekys*, i.e. the axe that they carried on their shoulders (Anna Komnêna II, 9, 4; IV, 5,3; IV, 6; XIV, 3,8). Psellos (VI,

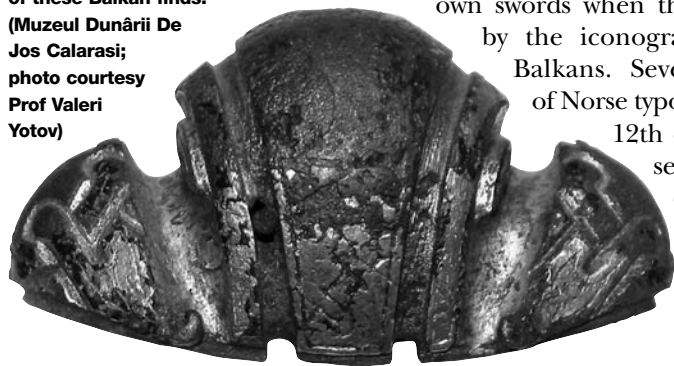
Three angles on a Varangian battleaxe from the Balkans. The shape is significantly similar to those shown in the 11th–12th century Scylitzès MS, and the large, squared socket in the head also suggests the use of a long shaft. (Courtesy World Museum of Man, Orlando, Florida; inv it #5)





Axehead from Kapelkova, probably Varangian, 11th–12th century; this specimen measures 6.7in by 4.9in (17 by 12.5cm), and again probably took a two-handed shaft. The shape makes clear the use of the term for a single-edged axe – *eterostoma* – in repeated Byzantine references to the Varangians' particular weapon. (Photo courtesy Prof Valeri Yotov)

Sword pommel of a Varangian guardsman, late 10th–early 11th century, from the Danube island of Pacuiul Lui Soare. This trilobate example, with rich gilt bronze decoration, is of Type S according to Petersen's classification. It corresponds with that of a damascened iron sword found in a bog near Slagelse in Sjaelland, Denmark. Another inlaid lobed pommel of Petersen Type T1, found in north-east Bulgaria, resembles one from Lincoln in the English Danelaw, thus firmly supporting the Scandinavian provenance of these Balkan finds. (Muzeul Dunării De Jos Calarasi; photo courtesy Prof Valeri Yotov)



87; VII, 24) describes the Varangians as bearing single-edged axes (*axinas eterostomous*), on the right shoulder (VI, 3). The axes were also described as *distralia* because they were carried on the right shoulder, but this was not invariable – Varangians also carried them on the left shoulder (William of Malmesbury, *De Gesta Anglorum*, II, 12). Some shorter single-edged 'half-axes' were already in use by Imperial guardsmen, and called *dextralion* (Salmasius, *Interpretes Homeri*, p.200) or *distralion monopelykon* (*De Cer.* I, 148). The axes of the English *Waringoi* at Dyrrachium are described by Gaudefroï de Malaterre as *bidentibus caudatis*, 'double bladed, tailed' – might they therefore have used tufts or plumes to decorate the shafts?

The battleaxe was generally at least 47–55in long (120–140cm); the head was about 7in (18cm) long and about 6.7in (17cm) from point to point across the blade. An axehead found in north-east Bulgaria measures 5.5 x 4.85in (14 x 12.3cm), and its shape can be compared to that of the very long-hafted axe of the Varangian depicted on the Schnütgen Museum ivory casket fragment from Constantinople (see page 6). Other specimens dated to the second half of the 11th century have been found near Drastar, Bulgaria, and may reasonably be connected with the Varangian contingent who fought there; one has interesting runic letters incised on the blade, which is slim in the middle and very wide at the cutting edge. Some interesting specimens of 10th–11th century axes found in Bulgaria at Barzina (Vratsa region) and Stana (Novi Pazar region) have blades decorated with copper and silver wire inlay, creating several framed compositions with images of serpents, four-legged animals and birds. These weapons are closely similar to the axes with decorated blades and shafts in the frescoes from Balileq Kilissé, Cappadocia, which are presumed to represent Varangian guardsmen in palace dress.

The Varangians defending Byzantium against the Crusaders in 1203 fought with axes and swords, and English and Danish guardsmen with axes are recorded by Villardouin (p.74) at the Blachernae Palace and the main gates, when four representatives of the Crusaders entered the city along a road lined with tall axe-bearing Varangians. In the 13th–14th centuries their weapon is described as a 'two-edged' axe (Kantakouzenos, II, 13, p. 289); in this period the axe generally had a blade of trapezoidal shape.

Swords

Although the bulk of the Varangians' gear would have been issued from imperial armouries, the guardsmen traditionally provided their own swords. The sagas make clear that many Scandinavians retained their own swords when they entered the Guard, as is also confirmed by the iconography and the archaeological finds in the Balkans. Several swords found at Bulgarian sites are of Norse typology, all dating from the end of the 10th to the 12th century. The pommels include quadrangular, semi-circular, triangular, lobed and inlaid types (see accompanying photographs). Apart from their double-edged Scandinavian swords the Varangians also used single-edged weapons from the imperial armouries, and the sagas record highly decorated swords in the hands of Varangian officers.

Swords were kept in leather-covered wooden scabbards; for reconstructions of these we rely primarily upon iconographical and literary sources, although some substantial physical evidence for contemporary construction does survive. The Varangian depicted on the Schnütgen Museum casket shows a sword of typical Nordic type in a scabbard fitted with a baldric. Giving the Viking taste for ornate decoration, combined with the Byzantine taste for luxury, we can presume that many scabbards were richly ornamented, although little survives apart from metal lockets and chapes. Late 10th–early 11th century examples found in Bulgaria, usually of openwork bronze, show typical Viking decoration (e.g. of the ‘Germanic bird pattern’ and ‘Germanic four-legged beast’ types, according to G. Paulsen’s classification), often in the so-called Borre and/or Jellinge styles similar to 10th-century chapes found in York, England and Hafurbjarnastadir, Iceland. A second series of chapes are of a mixed Byzantine-Viking style termed ‘Eastern palmette’; some of these are decorated with the image of an eagle or hawk, as often seen on Scandinavian weapons, or silver amulets worn by the Varangians and found on the Danube fortress-island of Pacuiul Lui Soare.

Iconography indicates that swords were slung at the left hip, either in a near-horizontal position or at a steeper angle. The scabbard might hang from a baldric passing over the right shoulder and attached to it by means of a suspension system combined with two scabbard rings, or might be attached to a waist belt by looped straps. (The suspension of the scabbard for any medieval warrior was a element of great importance. It was crucial to avoid the scabbard tangling between the legs and tripping the wearer, and a near-horizontal method of suspension best satisfied this requirement.)

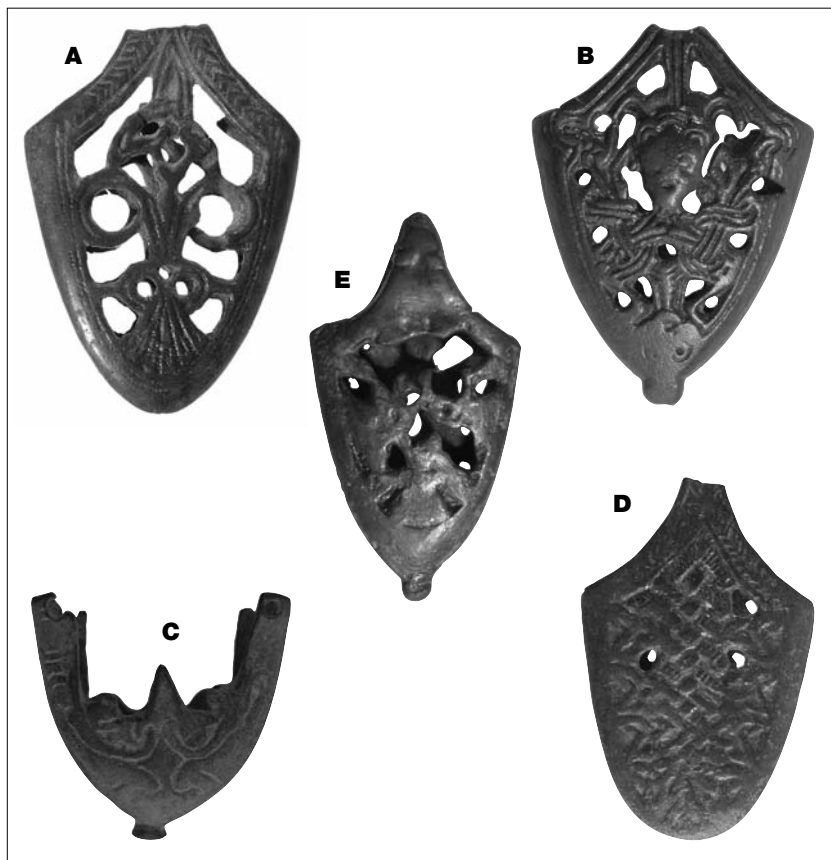
Rhomphaiai

One of the traditional weapons of Roman imperial guardsmen, the *rhomphaia*, was inherited by at least some Varangians, and examples have been found by Bulgarian archaeologists. Descended from the Thraco-Dacian *falx* that had been adopted by the Roman army in the 2nd century AD, this two-handed weapon could be either a medium-length pole arm with a long, narrow blade, either entirely straight or curved only at the point, and mounted on a shaft of about equal length; or a longer pole arm with a scythe-like blade. Described in its Thracian context by Plutarch, it is represented in the hands of imperial guardsmen on the Column of Marcus Aurelius, and its use by the Roman army is continuously attested by archaeological finds and iconographical sources from the 3rd to the 6th centuries.

In the Late Empire and Byzantium the employment of these weapons became distinctive of the Imperial Guard. Constantine Porphyrogenitus (*De Cer.*, 72) mentions for the 10th century the use of *spathovaklia* – i.e., weapons combining a *spathion* (swordblade) with a *vaklion* (from Latin *baculus*, staff), so a blade mounted upon a shaft. Constantine describes the bearded imperial *Protospatharioi* (‘the first of the imperial swordsmen’) as riding cataphract horses, armed with swords and these long-shafted weapons, which are ‘rested on their shoulders’, and a late 9th–early 10th century illuminated codex of the story of Job (Vat.Gr.749 folios 17v,19r) shows them. In this context the *rhomphaia* is distinct from the



Varangian sword of Petersen's Type Z, from the village of Gradeshnitsa, Vratsa region; it corresponds to a sword of similar date found in the River Thames, London. (Photo courtesy Prof Valeri Yotov)



Bronze sword scabbard chapes of Scandinavian/Germanic styles, 10th–11th century, from Bulgaria; some of these finds show gilding.

(A) From the fortress of Zavet, Razgrad region; note stylized image of a bird.

(B) & (C) From NE Bulgaria

(D) From Pavlikeni

(E) From the fortress of Miladinovtsi

(Photos courtesy Prof Valeri Yotov)

drepanon, another kind of scythe-like pole arm visible in many depictions of the Betrayal of Christ, and referred to in military use (Kedhrênós, 589; Scylitzès, 668). These weapons are mentioned as issued to Varangian guardsmen. Anna Komnêna (IX, 9,2) refers to them as an alternative to swords and spears, using a term distinct from that which she uses for the battleaxe; and Psellos (VII, 7, 28) expressly states that the Palace Varangians carried ‘a certain single-edged blade of heavy iron’ on one shoulder. Psellos refers to the select group of guardsmen protecting the imperial person:

‘...the guards banged on their shields all together, bawled their heads off as they shouted their war-cry,

clashed *blade on blade* [author’s italics] with answering calls, and went off in a body to the emperor, thinking he was in danger. Then, forming a circle about him so that no one could approach, they carried him off to the upper parts of the palace...’

Psellos is certainly not using ‘blade’ to refer to the great *pelekys* axe of the Varangians, because in other passages (V, 27) he clearly distinguishes between the two weapons. The 11th-century *Alexiad* describes two guardsmen looking after the emperor’s spare horse in battle as armed with ‘*rhomphaiai*’, that were usually to be carried [by those] surrounding the emperors’. Weapons might be richly ornamented, and it is probable that *rhomphaiai* carried in the emperor’s presence would have had gilded and gemmed shafts and perhaps chiselled and inlaid blades.

The weapon was certainly of a distinctive type and shape: the written sources, the iconography and the archaeology suggest that in most cases the single-edged blade had the shape of a straight or slightly curved *falx* and about the same length as the shaft (for which apple-wood is mentioned), the whole weapon measuring perhaps 3.3ft (1.04m). However, three blades of a different type have been found by Russian archaeologists in the Byzantine fortress of Anapodje in Georgia, which was garrisoned by Varangians in the 11th century. The first blade, which measures about 11.8in (30cm) long and 5in (12.7cm) wide, is slightly curved, and was inserted in the wooden shaft by means of a flattened tang. The other two blades, more or less of the same length but wider

at c.3.5in (9cm), are of a true sickle shape; one has the same shaft-attachment as the first, but the other curls around into an iron tubular socket. These blades suggest employment on longer shafts, so should perhaps be considered specimens of *drepana* rather than *rhomphaiai*; however, their presence in a place garrisoned by Varangians, and their similarity to weapons carried by Varangians in the iconography of the Betrayal, suggest the possibility that they may be what was termed *rhomphaiai*.

Spears and javelins

Many sources describe the Varangians as armed with spears (*kontaratoi*, in Kekaumenos, 30,5). Guardsmen used both throwing and thrusting spears, of Norse and Eastern Roman typology. Since their first recruitment, Rus were selected as *akontistai* (*Praecepta Militaria*, II, 24), i.e. experts in the employment of the *akontion*, a particular kind of javelin. Archaeology and figurative sources also confirm the Varangians' use of 'winged' spears, i.e. with a short crossbar, perhaps intended as a defence against cavalry. Some spearheads were inlaid with silver geometric patterns (*hoggsþjot*, in Old Norse).

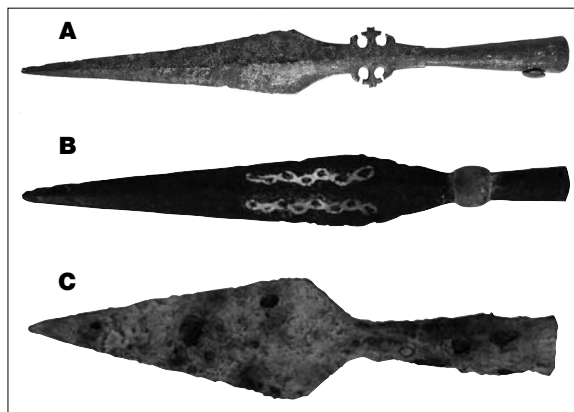
Amongst the artefacts found south of Drastar in Bulgaria, together with camp equipment clearly of Nordic origin, were various javelin- and spear-heads of different shapes and sizes, including foliate, barbed and diamond-shaped forms varying from very slim to quite broad. They range in length from, e.g., a foliate spearhead c.5.9in (15cm) long, with a strong central groove, typical of the Mediterranean tradition and analogous to a Roman spear from the Serçe Limani shipwreck, to a broad 'diamond' spearhead 12.2in long (31cm), with crossbars. These finds are important not only for their site, linked to the battle of Drastar, but also for corresponding in all cases to images in late 11th-century manuscript miniatures. They show that a mixture of Nordic and Byzantine weapons was already well established in the armoury of the Varangians at the time of the Komnênai.

CLOTHING

The Eastern Roman tradition of distinctive military dress, with units differentiated from one another by 'uniform' colour and shield blazons, seems to have continued until the end of the Empire. Foreign units, such as the Varangians, were even more distinctive. The original guardsmen from Rus and Scandinavia came in their own clothing, but this was very soon influenced by Slavic and/or Byzantine styles and materials.

Tunics

The typical western European tunic worn by the Scandinavians was of simple T-shape, varying in length from mid-thigh to ankle. It was made in linen, wool, linen-weave cotton or silk, in basic natural colours – brown, grey-blue, green, yellow, brick-red. Tunics with long, narrow sleeves were cut with the sleeves 6–8in longer than the arm so that the



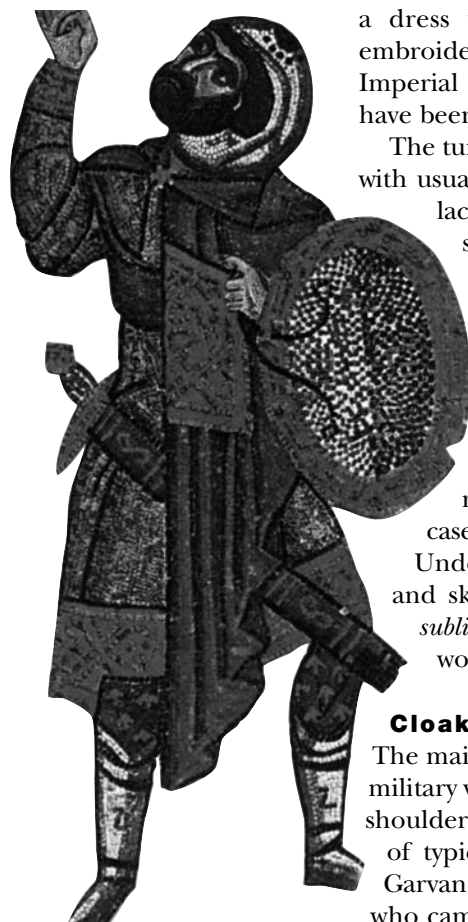
Three spearheads of varying types, all found near Drastar in north-east Bulgaria, the site of the Varangian Guard's defeat at the hands of the Pechenegs in 1087.

(A) Exceptional example of an iron spearhead with niello decoration; its design is analogous with Scandinavian 'winged' spearheads classified by J. Petersen and P. Paulsen. While the crossbar between blade and socket forms a clear symbol of Christian presence in the Guard, nevertheless the blade bears incised decoration in the form of two birds of prey, symbolizing Odin's ravens Hugin and Munin.

(B) Iron spearhead inlaid with silver geometric patterns (*hoggsþjot*), and with a bronze collar at the junction of blade and socket. This wonderful specimen measures 12.2in (31cm) in length, and its shape recalls the spears illustrated in the hands of many Byzantine guardsmen in miniatures and paintings.

(C) Iron spearhead of 'squared' or diamond shape, measuring 11.8in by 2.75in (30cm by 7cm). This is identical in shape to spears carried by the presumed Varangians on folio 26v A of the Scylitzès manuscript. (Photos courtesy Profs Boyan Totev and Valri Yotov)

This and the next two illustrations are 11th-century Byzantine images of the Roman centurion who was present at the Crucifixion and is traditionally named as Longinus; all can be plausibly interpreted as representing Varangians in highly decorative senior officer's clothing and armour. This image is from the Nea Moni mosaic on Chios. It shows a decorated hood; a pink-red tunic with red-on-gold hem decoration; a dark blue cloak with a red-on-gold chest panel; dark blue trousers ornamented with gold arrowheads; and white boots with black stripes and red devices. The inside surface of the shield is shown, halved in white and blue with red Kufic inscriptions; black arm/hand straps are attached at four points, perhaps in an X-shape. (Author's collection)



excess material bunched and wrinkled along the forearm. The neck opening, wrists and bottom hem were decorated with embroidery or with applied borders. In winter earlier Russian Varangians serving in the Guard wore their national dress, formed by two tunics, often finely woven and dyed, over baggy trousers of Turkish origin. Leather caps and coats were also trimmed with fur.

The Byzantine 'uniform' style was a tunic (often with an over-tunic) falling to a little above the knee, trousers, and boots to just below the knee, with different kinds of cloak. The cut of garments was simple, T-shaped and loose-fitting, and changed only gradually under foreign influences. Byzantine culture excelled in the field of decoration, creating an impression of splendour unmatched in Western Europe. Braid, tapestry-work, appliqué, embroidery and even precious-metal threads and jewels were all applied to clothing, in circular yokes, bands, strips, roundels, squares and *clavi*. The fibres used to create these garments included cotton, linen, wool and silk, and the use of patterned fabrics such as brocades and damask is also attested by archaeological finds in Cherson.

The silk and dyed-textile industry of Byzantium was appreciated by the Varangians, who adopted local clothing in brilliant colours. The iconography linked to the Guard shows orange, scarlet, off-white, greenish-grey, pale pink and pale blue-grey as the main tunic colours. While on duty in the imperial residence the Varangians may have worn a dress uniform consisting of a red or red-purple tunic, often embroidered at the cuffs, and a purple cloak indicative of service in the Imperial Guard, often with gold embroidery. This uniform may also have been worn, at least by the officers, on the battlefield.

The tunic (*chiton* or *himation*) might be of knee-, shin- or ankle-length, with usually tight-fitting sleeves to the wrist; in some cases sleeves were laced or stitched closed on the arm, in a similar fashion to Western styles after about 1100. The embroidery or interweaving was often in repeat patterns representing leaves and tendrils, sometimes shown as gold-coloured. An over-tunic (*roukhon*) was worn either in colder seasons or for court or other special occasions, in the latter case usually heavily decorated. The sleeves of these garments were wider and shorter than on the basic tunic, and they might fall to between the knee and ankle. The neck openings of such tunics were either round or square, either quite wide or tight-fitting, in the latter case perhaps tied or laced at the back.

Undergarments or *esôforia* (a word also indicating the inner tunics and skirts) of a typical Roman fashion, derived from the classical *subligaculum*, are well represented on the Cologne casket, perhaps worn with a small border or *cymation* on the upper edge.

Cloaks

The main cloak was the *chlamys*, sometimes called *sagion* in the shorter military version. It was rectangular or semi-circular, fastened at the right shoulder by a pin or *fibula* brooch, usually circular. One cloak-fibula of typical Russo-Scandinavian shape has been found at Dinogetia-Garvan in Romania, and is associated with the passage of Varangians who came to Miklagard through the Black Sea. Later cloaks had neck

sections cut out to improve the way they hung. Some had trimming on all edges, some only on the straight front edge, but many were decorated with *tablia*. These were pieces of plain or decorated cloth attached to both front edges and shaped as squares, rectangles, parallelograms, trapezoids and possibly semicircles.

Clothing gradually changed under the influence of both East and West. From the East came the acceptance of the kaftan coat, a form of which (*kabbadion*) was mostly used by Byzantine – and therefore also Varangian – senior officers after c.1250.

Headgear

The headgear shown as used by Varangians in some iconography are the coif-like hood (*koukoulion*, from the Latin *cucullus*) – basically a circle of cloth, often covered with silk, with an offset hole; and the shawl – a triangular or folded square cloth that could be tied under the chin or at the back of the neck. They are usually white, of Levantine shape. The originals were probably padded so as to be worn under a helmet. This typical headgear is often associated in 10–12th century Byzantine art with representations of the centurion Longinus, traditionally present at the Crucifixion. The Varangian officer represented in the Munich enamel (see page 42) seems to have decorated tying-tapes stitched along the lower edge of the hood, hanging loose. Some images also show the use of the Byzantine military turban or *phakeolis*, worn instead of a helmet or, more probably, under it.

Leg and footwear

Highly decorated trousers (*anaxyrida* or *toubia*) are visible on some presumed Varangian guardsmen represented in the sources. Folio 208r of the Scylitzēs MS shows purple hose worn together with dark boots. Cotton or linen *bracae* completely covering the leg from thigh to toes were a typical Roman fashion since the Late Empire, and some specimens (like those illustrated on the Munich enamel) are tight and heavily embroidered.

High leather boots were the norm. *Kamptouva* protective leggings worn over boots or in combination with low shoes are shown in iconography of the Varangians, e.g. on the Cologne ivory casket and in the frescoes of Aghia Sophia in Kiev. Other guardsmen are shown with high boots disappearing under the front of long mail or scale coats; it has been suggested that such boots were sometimes suspended like stockings, but there is no evidence either way. Some guardsmen are shown in low shoes, probably the *mouzakia* associated with use by infantry.

Some Byzantine illustrations show the use by guardsmen of so-called *Wickelbande*, a sort of woollen puttees wrapped spirally around the legs. These were typical of the Viking Age, and surviving fragments have been found at sites including Zalatovye near Novgorod. The finds suggest that the bands were c.3–4in (75–100mm) wide, and we may suppose a length



The centurion in a cloisonné enamel from the Reliquary of the True Cross, now in the Hermitage Museum (Inv # Omega 211). See reconstruction as our Plate B2; the bird blazon on the shield supports his identification as a Varangian. (Author's collection)



An enamel now in the Munich Glyptothek – see Plate C1 for reconstruction. The shield is painted blue round the edge, decorated with small almandine stones, with white pearls edging the central white field bearing a half-black and half-blue raven; four dots around the raven presumably represent rivets attaching hand- and arm-straps. This image is usually interpreted as having a circular shield, but it is conceivable that the artist wished to represent a kite-shield in profile. (Author's collection)

of 8–11ft (c.2.5–3.5m.) They are of a suitably stretchy ‘herringbone’ weave, sometimes using contrasting coloured warp and weft; purple and blues are the commonest colours (and the Munich enamel actually shows light and dark blue bands), though fragments also show black, black-brown, red-brown, yellow-brown and orange-red. Fastening must usually have been by simply tucking in the loose ends, but there is also evidence for tablet-woven garters tied below the knee, often with plaited ends interlaced with bronze wire, particularly in the Baltic regions. A pair of small iron hooks were found below the kneecaps of a 10th-century male skeleton at Novgorod, and small rings have also been found with traces of linen from the trousers.

Belt fittings

Splendid specimens of belt fittings used by the Byzantine army of the 11th–12th centuries have been recovered in various areas around the Black Sea. One gilded bronze example found at Pacului Lui Soare and dated to the 11th century shows both interlaced animal and vegetal decorations typical of Germanic Northern Europe, and a rivetted ornamental plaque with Norman decoration. This find, together with a sabre crossguard discovered in Garvan, have been classified by archaeologists as trade objects of Russo-Scandinavian origin passing along the ‘road of the Varangians to the land of Greeks’ linking the Baltic Sea to Constantinople. Garvan and Dinogetia were part of the Thèma Paristion, a territory of passage and recruitment for Varangians.

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PLATE COMMENTARIES

A: EARLY VARANGIANS – BATTLE OF ABYDOS, 13 APRIL AD 989

A1: Warrior of the Russo-Varangian *druzhina*

Leo the Diacon records Rus warriors wearing mail corselets and carrying shields 'the height of a man' – clearly, the tall rectangular shields of the Slavs. The iron spangenhelm with gilded bronze fittings, like most of his equipment, is from the Tschernigow-Tschernaja Mogyla grave, which also contained two swords of the first half of the 10th century, a Turkish sabre, two ringmail armours (one with the lowest rows

in bronze), two drinking horns, a vessel, and coins related to the Emperor Basil II. Werner has shown that elements on the lower edge of the helmet were used to attach a mask visor, here reconstructed from a specimen dated by H.R. Robinson to the 10th century (though by Russian archaeologists to the 12th). Note his forearm and hands; the Rus adopted from the Turks the tattooing of blue-green zoomorphic patterns from fingertips to shoulders. The most fanatic warriors tattooed the whole body with religious symbols, either pagan or Christian.

A2: Russian Christian warrior

From the carved relief in Mikhaylovsky-Dimitriski Monastery, Kiev. The Rus were generally blond or red-

haired, sometimes with a shaved chin but abundant moustaches; again, he has tattoos on his face and hands. His 'Roman' armour is reconstructed from fragments found in north-eastern Bulgaria, as is the sword pommel of Petersen's Type T1; note too the bowcase. The baggy trousers were of Turkish origin; Arabian traders nicknamed the Rus 'the people with the trousers made from 100 spans of cloth'.

A3: Varagian officer

This warrior's equipment has been reconstructed from various finds in the Balkans (the sword from Gradeshnitsa, and a chape from north-eastern Bulgaria) and Ukraine (the gilded and iron helmet from Gniezdowo). His heavy armour is of typically Byzantine type, combining ringmail with a lamellar *klivanion* and splint-armour limb defences; so too is his patterned cloak, though fastened with a silver *fibula* from Kiev. The details of his horse harness and Byzantine silk saddle cover are from Gniezdowo.

A4: Archigos of Byzantine *katafraktoi*

This heavy cavalry officer in the army of the rebel general Várdhas Phokás is equipped with a lamellar *klivanion*, in accordance with the *Praecepta Militaria* of Nikêphóros Phokás, here worn in combination with a ringmail *lorikion* copied from the 10th-century specimen preserved in the Iviron Monastery at Mt Athos. Two or three layers of ringmail face protection below the iron helmet leave only the eyes uncovered. The typically Eastern Roman sword with a gilded hilt, and the iron mace, are from specimens found in Ukraine and Bulgaria. The horse is protected by *klivania* made of bison hide, and an iron chamfron from Noba covered with decorative fabric.

B: VARANGIANS IN THE BALKANS, 1020–1050

B1: Bolli Bollasson

The costume of the centurion represented in the Nea Moni mosaic (Chios, c.1040) may have been inspired by a Varangian guardsman, and in fact fits well with the description of Bolli Bollasson in the *Laxdaela Saga*, which describes him returning to Scandinavia from Constantinople in 1030: 'He wore clothes of velvet that the Emperor had



Sheath chape of a 10th–11th century dagger of characteristically Norse type, found at Rousokastron (literally, 'fortress of the Rhos') in NE Bulgaria; see Plate B3. This exceptional specimen is probably associated with the Varangians who took and held the fortress during Basil II's Bulgarian campaign. Longer and shorter knives from imperial arsenals were also widely employed, enclosed in leather sheaths sometimes decorated with bronze plates. (Photo courtesy Prof Valeri Yotov)



A draco standard represented in an external carving on the church of Mesopotami, Albania; see Plate B3. (Author's collection, from Ugolini)

given him, and over them a cloak of fine red cloth; at his side he bore his sword *Fòtbitr* [Footbiter]; its hilt was inlaid with gold, and so was the blade; he wore a golden helmet, and had a red shield at his side on which was drawn a knight in gold (which he had brought from Byzantium)'. This passage suggests the Varangians' adoption of Byzantine styles; other descriptions also mention gold-inlaid weapons and saddles. The sword illustrated is from Govezhda, and the bronze chape from the Chirpan area, Stara Zagora region.

B2: Imperial *Akolouthos*

There are two cloisonné enamel images of officers from the 11th and 13th centuries (respectively, a centurion on the Reliquary of the True Cross, and St Theodore from the Basilevsky collection, both now in the Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg), whose military garb invites identification with senior Varangian commanders; this figure is based on the Reliquary image (see page 41). He wears on his head either a loosened turban or a simple loose hood. His cloak is blue, decorated with yellow ivy leaves (a Christian symbol of eternal life) interspersed with what seem to be gilt metal studs. His corselet shows rows of alternate gilt and blued iron scales; this effect is attested by other Byzantine cloisonné works, and by fragmentary Near Eastern finds. There is an explicit mention of gilded scales worn by Imperial Guard and Thágmata troops (*De Cer.*, 506), and of the best men being provided with 'splendid and shining' lamellar corselets (Pseudo-Konstantinos/Nikêphóros Ouranós, *Taktika*, p.14 ; Leo, *Taktika*, VI, 4). The Reliquary figure shows a line of white lappets at the waist, above hanging '*pteryges*' apparently with halved facing in gilt and silvered metal. We reconstruct the corselet as worn over a red tunic with rich gold-thread decoration at wrists and hem. Note the pattern of decoration on the trousers, and brown bindings over blue boots. The axe, highly decorated with silver and niello, is copied from the Stana specimen, which corresponds to decorated axes represented on the Cappadocian frescoes. The sword pommel is from Pacuiul Lui Soare, the chape from NE Bulgaria, and his typical Viking 'spectacle-helmet' from Kiev. The shield is taken directly from the Reliquary enamel.

B3: Varangian standard-bearer

The armour is entirely Byzantine, combining the Yassenovo helmet, a coif, vambraces and greaves in splint-armour, and a ringmail corselet with leather over-strapping. Only his

sword and axe are of Norse typology. The *bipennis* ('double-headed' axe – i.e. with a cutting blade on one side and a pointed blade on the other) is found in the iconography and confirmed by archaeology. The sword copies the Opaka specimen, and the dagger the Rousokastron find. Note the belt pouch; these typically contained e.g. scissors to cut the beard and hair, flint and steel, tinder, a spoon and perhaps a cup. The *draco* standard is from the carving on the Mesopotami church in Albania, and the colours from the Bayeux Tapestry.

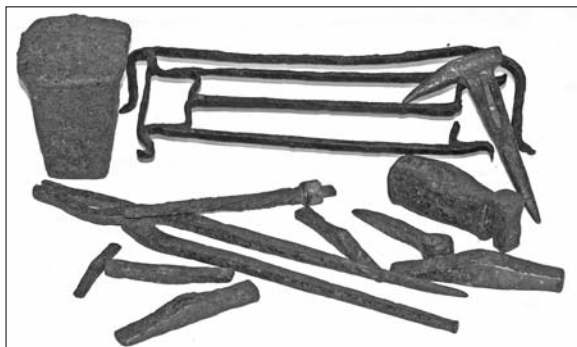
C: DEFEAT AT DRASTAR, 1087

C1: Archon Nambites

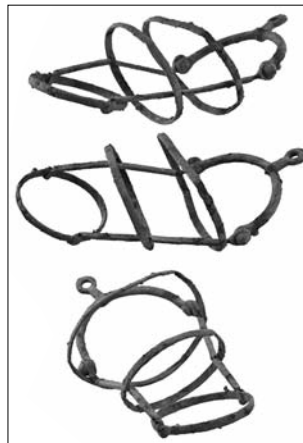
Our reconstruction of the Varangian commander is largely based on the enamel image of Longinus in the Crucifixion scene on the mid-late 11th century reliquary now in the Munich Glyptothek (see page 42). The tied-back hood is decorated on the top and the lower edge. The blue mantle is edged inside with purple, which suggests senior rank; we reconstruct a border of gold embroidery and gemstones, as is also evident on the hem of the tunic of cotton or coarse silk, which is also edged at the wrists with pearls. (Such decoration was applied to clothing separately, and so could be recycled easily.) Again, we show a lamellar corselet of alternating gilt and blued iron lames, probably fastened at both sides and shoulders by straps and bronze buckles. As in B2, white lappets show above the hardened leather or felt strips protecting the upper arms and belly. The officer's sash (*zoni*, *loros* or *lorionin* – *De Cer.*, II, 574–576), in blue and gold, is tied tightly around the body high beneath the armpits. The decorative style on the trousers is from the Munich enamel, which also seems to show blue herringbone-weave puttees fastened by top garters and worn with low shoes. The sword represented on the enamel may resemble the 10th–11th century specimen found at Tekija on the Danube; the enamel shows a decorative tuft fixed to the pommel. Note the magnificent spearhead found on this battlefield, to which we have attached a pennon copied from the Esphigmenou Codex.

C2: Danish Varangian blacksmith

This is a reconstruction of the figure on the Schnütgen Museum ivory casket (see page 6); note the great length



Smith's tools and equipment of Norse origin, abandoned near Drastar (Dristra, Silistra), NE Bulgaria, during Aléxios I Komnénos' campaign against the Pechinegs in 1087. (Photo courtesy Profs Valeri Yotov and Boyan Totev)



Iron frame fittings from wooden buckets of Norse type, abandoned near Drastar in 1087. (Photo courtesy Profs Valeri Yotov and Boyan Totev)

of the Danish axe. Before the battle the Emperor Aléxios sent the imperial tent and baggage to Betrinum (perhaps modern Vetrin, on the banks of Danube in the Silistra district). Some gold coin hoards that might be connected with the campaign were found along the old roads in Silistra, and close to them pottery, weapons and equipment, many of clearly Norse origin or with Norse characteristics. A complete set of camp forge tools was found, of pure Nordic style and finding parallels in tool chests from Gotland; with them were the iron fittings of wooden buckets, similar to finds from Viking camps.

C3, 4 & 5: Varangian guardsmen

C3 is from the fresco in the Panaghia Miriokephala on Crete. Note his red-brown tunic; iron sole and heel reinforcements for the boots (*touvia*) are often found in excavations. His axe, and the sword of his wounded companion, are taken from examples found on the battlefield.

C4 is reconstructed with an iron nasal helmet and attached coif found on the battlefield. Again, note the strapping worn over his ringmail armour; pictorial sources do not help us to understand the fastening system, but buckles at the back or sides seem most likely.

C5 is reconstructed from an ivory representing the Crucifixion, with colours from a similar figure in the Cretan fresco of the Crucifixion from St George, Kournas. Note the turban (*phakeolios*); the axe decorated with niello and the bronze shield boss were found on the battlefield.

C6: Byzantine kataphraktos

This fleeing cataphract is from the fresco of the Serpent Church, Chapel 28 at Goreme. Note his corselet worn over a padded *zoupa*.

D: LIFE IN CONSTANTINOPLE, 11th–12th CENTURIES

D1: Varangian circus champion

Paintings in the cathedral of St Sofia in Kiev suggest the possibility of Varangian champions fighting in the Hippodrome as gladiators, or participating in hunting spectacles organized in the Circus for the entertainment of the city population. This man is armed with a shorter but effective axe, based on a specimen found in north-eastern Bulgaria. Note his tunic, with a richly embroidered *maniakion* around the neck.



Detail from 12th-century fresco at Derevo, representing St Cyril and the emperor surrounded by bodyguards; see Plate E2. The helmet of the Varangian is shown as lacquered green, with gilt brow and nasal protection identical to a specimen recently found at Yenikapı, Istanbul. (Author's photo from original in Gallery of St Sofia, Kiev; courtesy Cathedral Museum).

D2, 3 & 4: English Varangians

Copied from the miniature on folio 208r of the Scylitzès MS. Byzantine sources confirm what it shows us, that many Varangians wore their hair long, with bushy beards and moustaches. The tunics of D2 and D3 are plain, rather loose, just short of knee-length, and girded at the waist; they are armed with the *rhomphaia* or *drepana* found at the Georgian fortress of Anapopjie. D4's costume reminds us of the considerable wealth that a Varangian could amass, typically displayed in the quality of his clothing and ornaments; the precious belt-fittings are from Dinogetia-Garvan.

D5: Varangian private guardsman

Also from the St Sofia frescoes in Kiev. Many Varangians hired out as private retainers to Byzantine noblemen. Sky-coloured tunics are recorded by Yahya as worn by the guardsmen armed with gilded axes that he saw in Constantinople in 900. Although at that date they were probably simply Rus mercenaries, the use of sky-blue tunics by the Varangians proper is suggested by the Scylitzès and other manuscripts. His spear is of Petersen's Type M, copied from a specimen found in north-eastern Bulgaria.

D6: Byzantine lady

The Varangians were famous not only for their Germanic colouring and beards, but for their vigour, and for being 'as tall as date palms'; they certainly attracted the enthusiastic interest of the ladies of the capital.

E: VICTORY AT ESKI ZAGRA, 1122

E1, 2 & 3: Varangian 'Celtic bodyguards'

Kinnamos and Choniates state that at this victorious battle the Emperor John II Komnênós was accompanied by English mercenaries armed with axes. The Varangians are primarily based upon the Scylitzès MS and related artefacts found in the Balkans and Constantinople. The Scylitzès illustrations show that at least in the mid-12th century some of them continued to carry round shields together with the long 'kite' shields that Choniates describes them carrying in that battle, in combination with single-edged axes. The green-lacquered helmet of E2 is based on a 12th-century fresco from Ukraine representing Varangians around the emperor, and on a gilded

specimen recently excavated at Yenikapı in Istanbul. Note his calf-length ringmail *lorikion alusidotos* copied from a specimen preserved in the Cherson Museum; the belt end is from Pacuiul Lui Soare.

E4 & 5: Cavalrymen of the Pecheneg horde E6: Pecheneg woman

The Pecheneg cavalrymen and woman are based upon the reconstructions of Dr David Nicolle and Dr Pletnyeva.

F: THE FALL OF CONSTANTINOPLE, 1204

F1: English Varangian guardsman

The Varangians of the Imperial Guard would have been equipped with the finest that the armouries of the Empire could provide. The *chapel-de-fer* helmet is in Russo-Byzantine style, while the protective mail coif covering the whole face is based on a find from Kazanlik, Bulgaria. He is armed with the two-handed axe that was the identifying symbol of the regiment. The shield blazon is from a miniature in the Scylitzès MS.

F2: Russian Varangian guardsman

This gilded helmet recently found in Vatra Moldovitei, and the armour, from Kitaev, show characteristics identical to the many guardsmen represented in the iconography of that period. Note his ringmail *chausses* in Western style, copied from a specimen also found near Kazanlik.

F3: Emperor Aléxios V Mourtzouphlos

The background is the red tent that he had erected on a hill within the city as his field headquarters. His armour is based upon that of Isaak Angelos Komnênós from the church of Panaghia Kosmosotira in Alexandroupolis. Note the gilded lamellar *thorakion folidotos*, the high boots (*pedilia*) in imperial red-purple, covered by rigid leather greaves of the same colour; and the iron mace (*korrhinë*) that Aléxios V is recorded as carrying during the battle. His helmet is carried by F4.

F4: Varangian Akolouthos with imperial standard

The costume, taken from a 13th-century enamel of St Theodore now in the Hermitage, is similar in many details to that of B1. The splendid helmet is from the original specimen found in Vatra Moldovitei. A corselet in alternate rows of gilded and blued iron scales is again worn over a red tunic, whose hem is shown as richly embroidered in gold with blue edges, and large dark spots probably indicating gemstones. He wears a dark blue *chlamys*, clasped on the right shoulder, and decorated with a repeat pattern of 'arrowheads' – perhaps trilobate leaf motifs – and dots or studs. The trousers (*anaxyrida*) are in aquamarine colour, decorated with crenellated cross shapes in several colours – one red, one green and four dark blue; on the left knee only is a dark blue example with a red centre. As footwear he wears pale blue *hypodhimata* with black cross-gartering, and note the brightly coloured round shield at his feet. The imperial *flamoulos*, with three red streamers, is that mentioned in Pseudo-Kodinos, representing an emperor on horseback; here we copy the Bamberg fragment.

F5: Danish Varangian guardsman

Copied from the mosaics of the church of St John the Evangelist in Ravenna, representing the capture of Constantinople by the Crusaders. He wears Byzantine equipment – a long ringmail coat, a helmet of 'Phrygian'

shape and a sword copied from those found in Pernik, and the *aspis periferes* adopted by the Byzantine army under Manuel I in the second half of the 12th century. The shield blazon is again from a miniature in the Scylitzès MS.

G: VARANGIANS AT COURT, 1351

G1: Varangian guardsman in full armour

The exercise performed by this man is described by Pseudo-Kodinos (IV, 197): 'The Varangians ... stand up in the Court near the columns of the Tribune, holding their axes in the palm of their hand; when the Emperor appears ... they raise them onto the shoulder'. He is copied from a Byzantine artwork of the 14th century that represents armour almost identical to those found in the graves at Wisby on the Swedish island of Gotland, scene of a battle of 1361; this coat-of-plates most closely resembles Wisby Armour 21, Type 4. The axe remained the principal weapon of the Varangians even in this late period; the blade shape is copied here from an English specimen of the 13th–14th century. Note the greaves, taken from a 14th-century find at Tarnovo.

G2: *Parakimomenos tou Kithonos*

The figure depicted in the Parisinus Codex, Gr. 1242 folio 5v, representing John VI Kantakouzenos, is often confused with a Varangian guardsman; however, the fact that he carries the imperial red-and-gold hilted sword in its red scabbard – a right reserved only to a few officers – excludes this possibility. He is most probably the *Parakimomenos tou Kithonos*, a non-eunuch officer charged with duties in the Imperial Household. His uniform is based on the codex, and reconstructed from 14th-century cloth fragments from Mistrà and from contemporary portraits of Byzantine senior officers. His *skiadion* cap is embroidered with gold thread, his long palace coat (*kabbadion*) is in silk, and his staff (*dikanikion*) is gold above alternating gold and ivory.

G3: *Megalodiermeneutes*

The costume of this high officer of the Varangians, the leader of the Interpreters or Dragomans, is described by Pseudo-Kodinos (II, p.163), and clearly shows Eastern influences. He belonged to the class of imperial officers wearing tall red caps or *skarànika*; in this case the *skaraniikon* is covered with red velvet with a small red tuft on the top. His *kabbadion* is highly decorated with silk embroidery, and his staff is described as 'red on one side, the other side in silver with small painted leaves'. The ceremonial weapon of the Grand Interpreter is copied from the seal of one Mikhail, who held this post. It combines a large axe blade with a sickle-shaped *rhomphaia*, both on a shaft fitted with a stirrup-like grip. (It is tempting to see in the axe shape a hint of the Irish/Scottish 'Lochaber').

H: THE LAST GUARDSMEN, 15th CENTURY

H1: *Varangopoulos*

The last picked troops who defended Constantinople against the Ottoman Turkish onslaught in 1453 were recruited from the *Varangopouloi*, the last mixed-blood descendants of the Varangians, who probably formed the final manifestation of the Varangian Guard. The man is equipped with the armour found at the castle of Halkis: a corselet of large plates over hardened leather and ringmail, with plate arm and leg defences of Milanese origin. His weapon is a German two-handed sword.



Right, front, and inside views of a Byzantine iron helmet of the second half of the 12th century from Pernik, Bulgaria; see Plate F5. It is 11.6in (29.5cm) high, with a diameter of 10.1in (25.7cm); an iron band surrounds the edge, and at the front can be seen two metal fittings which held the now-lost nasal bar by means of rivets. The drawn-forward apex of 'Phrygian' shape is visible in many iconographic sources, including a mosaic at the church of St John the Evangelist in Ravenna representing Varangians in front of the gates of Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade, which suggests the use of painted surfaces. (Author's photos, courtesy Pernik Archaeological Museum)

H2: English guardsman

The last mention of Englishmen armed with axes in Byzantine service is from the year 1404. This guardsman is equipped as a typical man-at-arms of that period, but his armour is copied from a fragmentary coat-of-plates of the second half of the 14th century, of Italian or Constantinopolitan origin, discovered in Azov. His axe is from a specimen in the museum at Kazanlik, which corresponds to axes represented in Serbian and Greek church paintings. The interesting blazon on his 'heater' shield is copied from a Cretan fresco of the early 15th century.

H3: Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos, 1408

This emperor's travels in Western Europe searching for help against the encroaching Turks inspired representations of him, his guards and retinue. The miniatures in the manuscript *Les très riches Heures du Duc de Berry* are a faithful reproduction of the emperor's cavalry clothing, of Turco-Persian inspiration. His high *skiadion* is lined with silk and fur; the main garment is an Italian *tamparion*, decorated with Chinese silk and Kufic inscriptions. Note his highly chiselled and inlaid sabre, copied from a specimen in Belgrade.

H4: Cretan guardsman

The warrior is copied from an icon of the Cretan school, in the church of Megali Panaghia, Patmos; details are supplied by two other icons showing similar armour. Note the *cuir-bouilli* upper arm defences and decorated leather corselet worn over a long-sleeved mail hauberk; although it is akin to the Eastern Roman tradition, Prof Babuin has interpreted this as of Italian origin. These items of equipment are therefore an accurate representation of the appearance of mercenary troops in service during the last decades of the Empire – and especially of those Cretans who, notwithstanding Venetian rule, felt it their duty to loyally serve the holy Emperor of Constantinople.

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